YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

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Please daven for a refua sheleima for YHE alumnus   
Rav Daniel ben Miriam Chaya Rut

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This week’s *shiurim* are dedicated in memory of Israel Koschitzky *zt"l*, whose yahrzeit falls on the 19th of Kislev. May the worldwide dissemination of Torah through the VBM be a fitting tribute to a man whose lifetime achievements exemplified the love of *Eretz Yisrael* and *Torat Yisrael*.

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**Shiur #08:**

**Recognizing the Oneness of God: The Parameters of the *Mitzva***

**Introduction**

In this *shiur*, we will shift our focus away from *keriat Shema* itself and toward a more fundamental topic: the *mitzva* of recognizing the oneness of God. We will address the relationship between that *mitzva* and the injunction to accept upon ourselves the yoke of God’s kingship.

Rambam opens his *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* by enumerating two *mitzvot* that touch on aspects of faith in God:

The first *mitzva* is that we are commanded to acquire knowledge of the nature of God’s existence, that is, to understand that He is the original cause and Source of existence who brings all creations into being. As God stated (exalted be He), “I the Lord am your God” (*Bamidbar* 15:41). (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 1)

**The Belief in God’s Existence: The View of Rambam and Ramban**

Let us begin by examining the first *mitzva* – belief in the existence of God and in His identity as the Creator. According to Rambam, maintaining this belief is one of the 613 *mitzvot*.

However, for various reasons, many objected to the view that this verse constitutes a *mitzva*. First, the verse is not formulated in the language of a *mitzva*, but rather as simply stating a fact. Second, the concept of *mitzvot* is meaningless ifone does not believe in their source. Thus, it is difficult to accept that there is a separate *mitzva* to believe in God, who is the very source of the *mitzvot* themselves.[[1]](#footnote-1) Third, if the *mitzvot* are like a king’s decrees, then recognizing the existence of the king should not itself be a *mitzva*.

Rambam clearly felt the need to demonstrate that the first of the Ten Commandments – “I the Lord am your God” – is indeed considered a *mitzva*. Rambam brought support for this approach from a passage at the end of *Makkot*:

At the end of the tractate *Makkot* it states: “613 commandments were given to Moshe at Sinai. From which verse do we see this? ‘Moshe charged us with the Torah’ (*Devarim* 33:4) – meaning the numerical value of the word ‘Torah.’” [The *gemara*] then challenged this, saying: “But is this the numerical value of ‘Torah’? It only totals 611!” The answer was given: “[The first two Commandments,] ‘I the Lord am your God’ and ‘You shall have no other gods’ were heard from God directly.” It is clear from this passage that “I the Lord am your God,” i.e., the command to believe in God, as we explained, is one of the 613 *mitzvot*. (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 1)

It seems that, in Rambam’s view, the greatest difficulty with his approach is the fact that the verse is not formulated in the language of a standard *mitzva*. Thus, Rambam brought a support from a passage in which the Sages seem to regard the injunction to believe in God as one of the *mitzvot*.

It seems, then, that Rambam was not bothered at all by the latter two difficulties that we cited above. According to his position, it is obvious that belief in God must be regarded as a *mitzva* in light of his definition of that obligation in the opening sections of his *Hilkhot Yesodei Torah*:

The foundation of all foundations and the pillar of wisdom is **to know** that there is a Primary Being who brought into being all existence. All the beings of the heavens, the earth, and what is in between them came into existence only from the truth of His being.

If one would imagine that He does not exist, no other being could possibly exist.

If one would imagine that none of the entities aside from Him exist, He alone would continue to exist, and the nullification of their [existence] would not nullify His existence, because all the [other] entities require Him and He, blessed be He, does not require them nor any one of them. Therefore, the truth of His [being] does not resemble the truth of any of their [beings].

This is implied by the prophet’s statement: “But the Lord is truly God” (*Yirmeyahu* 10:10), meaning that He alone is true and no other entity possesses truth that compares to His truth. This is what [is meant by] the Torah’s statement: “There is none beside Him” (*Devarim* 4:35) – aside from Him, there is no true existence like His.

This entity is the God of the world and the Lord of the entire earth. He controls the sphere with infinite and unbounded power. This power [continues] without interruption, because the sphere is constantly revolving, and it is impossible for it to revolve without someone causing it to revolve. [That one is] He, blessed be He, who causes it to revolve without a hand or any [other] corporeal dimension.

**The knowledge of this concept is a positive commandment, as it says, “I the Lord am your God**.” (*Hilkhot Yesodei Torah* 1:1)

This *mitzva* is not merely the commandment to believe in God; if it were, Rambam would need to take the two difficulties cited above into consideration. Rather, the *mitzva* is “**to know**,” an act that demands deep investigation, clarification, and study. This is what the obligation demands of us, according to Rambam.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ramban, in his glosses on *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, agrees with Rambam that “I the Lord am your God,” the first Commandment, refers to the *mitzva* of belief in God. He writes:

And what is good in my eyes within this entire subject is that “I the Lord am your God” was enumerated as a *mitzva*, as [Rambam] stated. And I have a support for this from the words of the Sages in the *Mekhilta* (*Yitro*, *Parashat Ha-Chodesh*): “Why were the Ten Commandments not said at the beginning of the Torah? To what may this be compared? To the following: A king who entered a province said to the people: May I be your king? But the people said to him: Have you done anything good for us that you should rule over us? What did he do then? He built the city wall for them, he brought in the water supply for them, and he fought their battles. Then he said to them: May I be your king? They said to him: Yes, yes. Likewise, God. He brought the Israelites out of Egypt, divided the sea for them, sent down the *man* for them, brought up the well for them, and brought the quails for them. He fought for them the battle with Amalek. Then he said to them: I am to be your king. And they said to him: Yes, yes…

**And this acceptance of kingship that they accepted at Sinai is, in truth, found in the Commandment of “I the Lord am your God.”** They explained further… A parable: A king entered a province. His servants said to him: Issue decrees upon the people. He answered: No! Once they have accepted my reign, I shall issue decrees upon them. If they do not accept my reign, why should they accept my decrees? Similarly, God said to Israel: “I the Lord am our God who brought you out of the land of Egypt. You shall have no other gods.” He [thus] said to them: “Am I He whose reign you have accepted in Egypt?” They replied: “Yes”; [so he went on] – “Now, just as you have accepted My reign, accept My decrees”…

It has been explained many times that the Commandment of “I the Lord am your God” refers to accepting God’s kingship, that is to say, belief in His divinity. And that which it said, “whose reign you have accepted in Egypt” – this is to say that they already believed in His divinity in Egypt, as it said, “And the people believed” (*Shemot* 4:31), and “They had faith in the Lord and His servant Moshe” (*Shemot* 14:31).

And God reminded them of this belief, and they accepted it upon themselves, and they said, “Yes, yes,” meaning that they believed and accepted upon themselves to reinforce their belief that God exists and that He is the God that brought them out of Egypt… Thus, it is clear that the first Commandment is worth enumerating as the first *mitzva* – the *mitzva* to believe in God.

Ramban’s position requires some examination. The first parable cited here indeed relates to the acceptance of God’s kingship as a *mitzva*. After the king performs all kinds of beneficial deeds on behalf of the people, they recognize his kingship and accept it upon themselves. However, the second parable emphasizes the principle that it is impossible to obey a command without first recognizing the commander. This implies, then, that “I the Lord am your God” is the basis for all the *mitzvot*, rather than a *mitzva* in its own right.

Ramban himself invokes this reasoning to explain the view of Bahag, who did not enumerate the *mitzva* to believe in God in his list of commandments:

And it seems from the view of *Ba’al Halakhot* (Bahag) that the 613 *mitzvot* only include the decrees that He, blessed be He, decreed upon us to perform or to refrain from performing. But the belief in His existence (blessed be He) – that he demonstrated to us through signs and wonders and the revelation of the Divine Presence before our eyes, and which is the crux and the root from which the *mitzvot* derive – would not be enumerated among them. And this is why the Sages said: “Issue decrees upon them! He answered: No! Once they have accepted my reign I shall issue decrees upon them.” They made accepting His kingship a value in its own right, and the *mitzvot* that He, blessed be He, then decreed are a separate value.

Therefore, it seems that even though Ramban adopts Rambam’s position in this respect, he maintains that the *mitzva* is different from all the *mitzvot* that follow it. The reason for this is that belief in God is the foundation of all the *mitzvot*; it enables their very existence. Nevertheless, Ramban maintains that belief in God should be enumerated as a separate *mitzva*. In light of the explanation of the parable from the Midrash, God demands that Israel accept His kingship. God does not suffice with the fact that we “know” Him, but demands that we accept His kingship as well.

The implication of this is that according to Ramban, the *mitzva* is not merely to recognize the existence of God, but also to crown Him as king over us. When Ramban calls this *mitzva* “belief in God’s divinity,” he is referring to the belief that God is the “commander” for all of humanity:

This Commandment is a positive *mitzva*. It says, “I the Lord am your God”: He is instructing and commanding them to know and believe that there is a God, **and that** **He is their God**, meaning currently and aboriginally. All derives from Him, through His desire and ability, and He **is their God, whom they must serve**. (Ramban, Commentary on the Torah, *Shemot* 20:1)

Ramban’s commentary here implies that in his view, there is absolutely no problem with commanding belief in God; there is no reason to object to enumerating “I the Lord am your God” as a *mitzva*. According to Ramban, the reason that enumerating belief in God as a *mitzva* is problematic is that belief in God is the foundation of the *mitzvot*, their primary basis. It is in this point that Ramban finds a distinction between his own position and that of Bahag, who was willing to claim that even the foundation – the very request that the people accept his kingship – can be considered its own *mitzva*.

Ramban does not explicate his position in regard to the second positive commandment in Rambam’s list, the *mitzva* to recognize the oneness of God. Nonetheless, it seems that *Ramban* would view this *mitzva* as belief in the unity of God and recognizing that there is no other gods beside Him. Thus, we find that there is a positive commandment of recognizing that there is only “the Lord alone” and a negative commandment that “You shall have no other gods beside Me.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

In contrast, it seems from Rambam’s language that he maintains that Positive Commandment 1 includes only the philosophical knowledge of God’s existence – that He is the Creator. According to Rambam’s position, Positive Commandment 2 (recognizing the oneness of God) is what obligates us – beyond the philosophical recognition of His unity – to accept His yoke upon ourselves as well.

Rambam’s language in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* implies that the very act of acknowledging and believing in the oneness of God dictates the acceptance of the yoke of His kingship. It seems to me that this point is connected to his view on the Exodus – that it is because of the Exodus that we are obligated, as God’s servants, to recognize Him and, as a matter of course, to accept His decrees.

**The Views of the Other *Rishonim***

We already clarified that according to Rambam, the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* is a separate *mitzva*, apart from the *mitzvot* that we have been discussing thus far. In contrast, *Yere’im* maintains that the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* is itself the *mitzva* of recognizing the oneness of God and accepting His yoke:

*Keriat Shema*: “You must revere the Lord your God… Him shall you worship” (*Devarim* 10:20), and accept His kingship and His yoke, morning and evening, as it says in *Parashat Va’etchanan*, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” The interpretation of the verse is thus: “Take to heart these words” – which are written above, i.e., “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” – “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.” (*Yere’im* 252)

*Semag* enumerates two *mitzvot* that relate to belief in God: the belief that God brought us out of Egypt and gave us the Torah and the belief that God is one, in heaven and on earth:

The first *mitzva* is a positive commandment to believe that the One who gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai through Moshe our master is the Lord our God, who brought us out of Egypt. And this is [referred to in] what God said at the time when He gave us the Torah: “I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt.”

The second *mitzva* is a positive commandment to believe and to hear (that He is one in heaven and on earth and in all four directions, as it says, “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” “Hear” – meaning, accept. As we find similarly, “May you hear in heaven” (*Divrei Ha-Yamim* II 6:23). And one should elongate the [letter] *dalet* [at the end of the word *echad*] until he finishes focusing on this thought that we have explained. (*Semag*, Positive Commandments 1-2)

According to *Semag*, there are two faith-related *mitzvot*: one mandating belief in God and the other mandating belief and internalization of the oneness of God. The latter belief must express itself through the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, which *Semag* considers an integral part of the second *mitzva*.

*Semak* enumerates two *mitzvot* as well, similar to *Semag*’s position. The first is the *mitzva* of belief in God:

To know that He who created heaven and earth, He alone rules above and below and in all four directions, as it is written: “I the Lord am your God.” And it is written, “Know therefore this day and keep in mind that the Lord alone is God in heaven above and on earth below; there is no other” (*Devarim* 4:39). To know, meaning to exclude the position of the philosophers who said that the world functions on its own based on the constellations, and that it does not have a ruler at all, and that even the splitting of the Red Sea and the Exodus from Egypt and all the wonders that happened were due to the constellations. Thus we must believe that they are speaking falsehood. Indeed, the Holy One, blessed be He, rules the world completely with the breath of His lips. (*Semak*, Commandment 1)

The second *mitzva* is the *mitzva* of recognizing the oneness of God, which is also the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*: “To unify the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is written, ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.’ And this is accepting the yoke of God’s kingship (*Semak*, Commandment 2).

From all the positions that we have seen thus far, it seems clear that no one is willing to enumerate the very obligation to believe in God as its own *mitzva*. Such a *mitzva* would seem to imply an inherent paradox (as R. Chasdai Crescas insisted; see n. 1). Each of the lists of *mitzvot* that related to this basic principle as a *mitzva* did so through its own unique point of view:

1. Rambam enumerates the *mitzva* of knowing God, emphasizing the obligation to know God and not merely to believe in His existence.
2. Ramban maintains that the *mitzva* is not to believe in God’s existence, but to accept His kingship upon ourselves in light of the acts of kindness that He performed on our behalf. He argues with Bahag over whether to enumerate the very obligation to accept God’s kingship as a *mitzva* or to omit it from the list, as it is the foundation for all the *mitzvot*.
3. *Semag* defined the *mitzva* as the obligation to believe that He who gave us the Torah is the same One who brought us out of Egypt. Here too, it seems that God’s very existence – and His existence as the “commander” – is taken as a given, as we received the Torah from Him. Rather, the obligation is to identify God as the One who brought us out of Egypt, as well as to recognize and accept His unity.
4. *Semak* defined the *mitzva* as the obligation to know that the Creator is the sole ruler of the world. In other words, the very knowledge of the Creator’s existence is not a *mitzva*, but rather that the Creator is also the Ruler and the One who leads the world forward to its eventual redemption.

In the same vein, *Semak* goes on to write:

And He is the One who brought us out of Egypt and performed all the wonders for us, and no man bruises his finger here on earth unless it was so decreed against him in heaven, as it says, “The steps of a man are made firm by the Lord” (*Tehillim* 37:23). And this is the source of what the Sages said (*Shabbat* 31a) that after a person dies, when he is led in for Judgment, he is asked, “Did you hope for salvation?” Where is this *mitzva* written? Rather, we can deduce from this that it is derived from this: That just as we must believe that God brought us out of Egypt, as it is written, “I the Lord am your God who brought you…” – and it must be that since this is [one of the Ten] Commandments, it means that just as I desire that you believe in Me, that I brought you out, so too do I desire that you believe that I the Lord am your God, and that I will bring you together and save you in the future. And, in My kindness, I will save you a second time, as it is written, “He will bring you together again from all the peoples…” (*Devarim* 30:3)

*Semak* views this *mitzva* as the broad concept of divine providence and God’s management of the world. The *mitzva* includes within it the value of hoping for salvation and for Israel’s ultimate redemption. According to this position, the fundamental principle here is that belief in Creation presumes that the Creation necessarily entailed intent and purpose. This stands in contrast to the philosophical views that the world has always existed, which assume that the creation of the world as we know it was mere happenstance. Since, in truth, the world is being managed and directed toward a goal, our faith is based upon the hope that we can realize this purpose: the salvation and redemption of the world.

We have seen that many of the *Rishonim* identified the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* with the *mitzva* of recognizing the oneness of God or with the obligation to accept the yoke of God’s kingship. However, Rambam, who enumerated the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* as a separate *mitzva*, views these as two separate *mitzvot*: one *mitzva* in the category of “duties of the heart” and another *mitzva* that is fulfilled through physical speech.

A person’s soul is built in such a manner that it can be manipulated and strengthened in a wide variety of ways. Duties of the heart are not always capable of allowing a person to internalize grand beliefs and concepts into his consciousness through the power of the mind alone. These duties must be reinforced through the power of speech, which imbues the beliefs and views in one’s mind with vitality. This power enables one to clarify these views and approach them on a deeper level, forming a deeper spiritual connection with them.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See *Or Hashem*, by R. Chasdai Crescas, which states:

   One cannot fathom a commandment without an identifiable commander. To that end, if we assume that belief in the existence of God, may He be blessed, is a *mitzva*, we already assume a prior belief in the existence of God, may He be blessed, in that He instructed us to believe in the existence of God. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To answer the possible objection that *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* uses the term “to believe (*le-ha’amin*)” rather than “to know (*lei-da*),” it should be noted that one cannot draw conclusions from the language of *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, as it was originally written in Arabic. In fact, it is known that the Hebrew translation of that work is imprecise in this case; many actually translate “to know” in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See *Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:5, which discusses the parallel between *keriat Shema* and the Ten Commandments, specifically the parallel between “the Lord alone” and “You shall have no other gods.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)