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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This week’s shiurim are dedicated in loving memory   
of Yehuda Nattan Yudkowsky *z”l* whose yahrzeit is 17 Cheshvan

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**Shiur #03:**

***Keriat Shema* (III): “And What Does One Recite?”**

**The Sections of the *Shema* That One Must Recite and Their Connection to the Biblical Texts**

**Interpreting the Phrase “These Words”**

In the [previous *shiur*](http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-02-keriat-shema-ii-fundamental-obligation-and-its-source), we presented a summary of the various positions regarding the scope of the obligation of *keriat Shema*. We will now discuss these positions from the point of view of the verses. As we do this, we will continue to develop the philosophical approach that we initially established in the first *shiur* of this series.

As we emphasized, the root of this discussion lies in the identity of “these words,” a phrase that is mentioned in the verse. In the previous *shiur*, we presented a number of possibilities:

1. The phrase “these words” relates to the first verse alone, which contains the concepts of faith in God’s existence and of belief in the oneness of God.[[1]](#footnote-1)
2. The phrase “these words” relates to the two verses that precede it, which deal with the oneness of God and loving God.[[2]](#footnote-2)
3. The phrase “these words” relates to the entire passage in question, i.e., the first passage of the *Shema*.
4. The phrase “these words” relates to the first two passages of the *Shema* (the passages beginning with *Shema* and *Ve-haya im shamo’a*, respectively).

The phrase “these words” appears in both of the first two passages of the *Shema*.[[3]](#footnote-3) Thus, the fundamental dispute between the last two positions is whether the phrase’s two appearances should be completely conflated, or if some distinction between them can be established.

It may be claimed that the phrase “reciting them” (*le-daber bam*) that appears in the second passage is not formulated in the imperative as in the first passage – “Recite them” (*ve-dibbarta bam*) – and there is thus no obligation to recite that passage. Alternatively, we can argue that although the phrase “reciting them” represents a kind of command, it is referring to the *mitzva* of Torah study and not to a specific command to recite any particular words. The *gemara* follows the latter approach in the course of its discussion of the position that the obligation of *keriat Shema* is to recite the first passage alone:

Why this difference [between the first and second passages]? Until this point, the *mitzva* of reciting [the *Shema*] and [maintaining] *kavana* applies, as it is written, “Take to heart… Recite them.” There too [in the second passage] also it is written, “Upon your very heart… reciting them”! **These words refer to words of Torah, and what the All-Merciful meant was this: Teach your children Torah, so that they may be fluent in them.** (*Berakhot* 13b)

In practice, we can only explain the various positions in this manner if we ignore the need to view “these words” as referring to the entire Torah in general as well. However, as we addressed in the first *shiur*, it seems that the *mitzva* of “Impress them upon your children” – the mitzva of Torah study[[4]](#footnote-4) – is not limited to a select number of verses or to a handful of isolated passages. If we view the phrase “these words” as relating to the entire Torah, we need to explain how we suffice with reciting only three solitary passages.

**The Possibility That the Phrase “These Words” May Contain a Dual Meaning**

To a certain extent, the simplest option is to claim that the phrase “these words” can be interpreted in two ways simultaneously. When it is used to refer to the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, it is interpreted in the more limited sense (according to one of the interpretations outlined above). However, when it is used to refer to the *mitzva* of Torah study, it is interpreted in the widest sense possible – to refer to the entire Torah.

However, there are two central difficulties with this option. The first is an exegetical difficulty; it is difficult to claim that one phrase can be interpreted in such starkly different ways at the same time. The second difficulty is that this approach leads us to four different definitions for “these words”:

1. They relate to the *mitzva* of **Torah study** – and refer to the entire Torah.
2. They relate to the *mitzva* of ***keriat Shema*** – and refer to one of the four suggestions presented above, with their various explanations.
3. They relate to the *mitzva* of ***tefillin*** – and refer to the four passages in the Torah in which the *mitzva* of *tefillin* is mentioned (*Shemot* 13:1-10; *Shemot* 13:11-16; *Devarim* 6:4-9; *Devarim* 11:13-21).
4. They relate to the *mitzva* of ***mezuza*** – and refer to the two passages in the Torah in which the *mitzva* of *mezuza* is mentioned (*Devarim* 6:4-9; *Devarim* 11:13-21).

Thus, it seems that the phrase “these words” can only be interpreted in the expansive sense, referring to the **entire Torah**. If we are dealing with the *mitzva* of Torah study, the phrase is directed at the entire Torah and the *mitzva* is fulfilled in practice through the entire Torah. However, if we are dealing with the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* or the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* or *mezuza*, while the phrase indeed refers to the entire Torah, the *mitzva* is fulfilled in practice through a limited number of verses or passages that represent the entire Torah.

**Representing the Entire Torah: Fundamental Representation vs. Technical Representation**

We can suggest two distinct ways in which a group of verses or passages from the Torah can represent the entire Torah: fundamental representation and technical representation.

In a case of fundamental representation, a specific passage or a number of specific passages contain content that exemplifies the fundamental principles of the Torah. By evoking these principles, these passages represent the entire Torah. These passages are the pillars of the Torah, its cornerstones, foundations for the overarching message of the Torah. It can be said of the remainder of the Torah (as we read in *Shabbat* 31a) “the rest is commentary – go and learn it.” By contrast, in a case of technical representation, specific passages can represent the entire Torah for reasons that have nothing to do with the actual content of the selected passages.

Let us clarify the matter. The Torah commands us to put on *tefillin* and to write *mezuzot*. As stated above, it would be unreasonable for the Torah to require us to write the entire Torah on each set of *tefillin* and on each *mezuza*. Therefore, it must be that we are required to select specific sections of the Torah to be written on *tefillin* and *mezuzot*.

Rabbinic tradition teaches us that one must inscribe on each set of *tefillin* the four passages in the Torah that mention the *mitzva* of *tefillin*. It would seem, then, that these four passages were not chosen because of their broader content, but rather because they all happen to mention the mitzva of *tefillin*. The same is true regarding the *mitzva* of *mezuza*. We inscribe each *mezuza* with the two passages in the Torah that make mention of the *mitzva* of *mezuza*.

However, things are not as they appear. In fact, the Torah included the *mitzvot* of *tefillin* and *mezuza* within passages whose content was already inherently important and capable of representing the entire Torah. In a practical sense, the choice of these passages to represent the entire Torah is a technical one, but this technical representation is rooted in the fundamental content of the passages.

As a side note, we will point out that when we discuss the “choice” of certain passages for use in connection to various *mitzvot*, this can essentially refer to one of only two possibilities:

1. **Rabbinic tradition**: There is a tradition that dictates how to perform these *mitzvot* in practice. According to this possibility, the “choice” in this case was undertaken by God, who selected these passages and relayed their identity to us in the form of a tradition.
2. **The Sages’ prerogative**: The Torah itself gave the Sages the ability to establish on their own which passages were to be inscribed on *tefillin* and *mezuzot*.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Chazal* were the ones who chose these particular passages.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Either way, one can assume that the choice of these passages was made based on the considerations that we have suggested.

Regarding the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* as well, there is logic behind the choice of passages that would represent the *mitzva* through “technical representation,” i.e., that they mention the *mitzva* without addressing it on a fundamental level. This form of representation fits the positions that maintain that one must recite the first passage or the first two passages in order to fulfill one’s obligation. These passages feature the command to recite the *Shema*, and thus one must recite them – just as we inscribe our *tefillin* with the passages that mention the obligation to put on *tefillin*.

However, it seems that the positions that maintain that one need only recite one or two verses to fulfill one’s obligation follow the approach of fundamental representation. By reciting these verses, one acknowledges that the values of recognizing the oneness of God and loving God are the foundations of our religious experience, the basic pillars of the Torah.

**The Custom to Recite Additional Passages**

In this context, it is worth pointing out that there are customs documented in rabbinic literature to recite additional passages from the Torah as part of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*. These passages have no technical connection to the verses from the passages that mention the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*. It follows that these customs must have been based in the approach that the Sages viewed the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* as an injunction to recite central Torah passages. In light of this, the appropriateness of these additional passages for the *mitzva* of *keri’at Shema* is entirely a function of fundamental representation.

**Reciting The Ten Commandments**

The most instructive example of this is the custom to recite the Ten Commandments as part of *keriat Shema*. It seems that this position views the Ten Commandments as the ultimate representation of the entire Torah. The position may stem from the following *mishna*:

The officer said to them, “Recite one blessing,” and they did so. **They then recited the Ten Commandments** and the first, second, and third sections of the *Shema*, and they blessed the people with three blessings, namely, “True and firm” [the blessing following the *Shema*]; the Temple service [the blessing of the *Amida* ending “who restores His Presence to Zion”]; and the priestly blessing. (*Tamid* 5:1)

According to the description of the *mishna*, the recitation of the Ten Commandments does not seem to be ancillary to the recitation of the *Shema*, but just the opposite. The Ten Commandments were recited before the *Shema*, and it appears that the recitation of the Ten Commandments was **the more important of the two**.

Moreover, 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, [and the passages] “Hear, O Israel!”; “If, then, you obey”; and “The Lord spoke.” R. Ami said in the name of Reish Lakish: This implies that [if one omits] the blessings [before and after the *Shema*, it] does not invalidate his recitation. R. Ba said: From this *mishna* you would not deduce at all [that the blessings are dispensable]. For the Ten Commandments are the essence of the *Shema*. (*Yerushalmi* *Berakhot* 1:5)

In this passage, the *Amora’im* discuss the status of reciting the Ten Commandments as part of *keriat Shema*. R. Ami understands that the Ten Commandments are not part of *keriat Shema*, and thus concludes that if one recites them between the blessings before or after the *Shema* and the *Shema* itself, one would still fulfill his obligation of *keriat Shema* (implying that the blessings are dispensable). However, in the conclusion of the passage, this argument is rejected, since R. Ba establishes that the Ten Commandments are the essence of the *Shema* – the most important part of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*.

The discussion in the *Yerushalmi* that follows makes it abundantly clear that the truth is the exact opposite of what we had thought. It is actually the Ten Commandments that represent the foundation for the obligation to recite the passages of the *Shema* with which we are familiar today:

Why do they recite these two passages each day? R. Levi and R. Shimon [disputed this question]. R. Shimon said: Because in them we find mention of lying down and rising up. R. Levi said: Because the Ten Commandments are embodied in them.

“I am the Lord your God” (*Shemot* 20:2) [is implied by the phrase] “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is your God” (*Devarim* 6:4).

“You shall have no other gods besides Me” [is implied by the phrase] “the Lord alone.”

“You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Lord your God” [is implied by the phrase] “You shall love the Lord your God.” [How so?] One who loves the king does not swear falsely in his name.

“Remember the Shabbat day and keep it holy” [is implied by the phrase] “Thus you shall be reminded [to observe all My commandments]” (*Bamidbar* 15:40). Rabbi says: [“All My commandments”] refers to the *mitzva* to keep the Shabbat, which is equivalent in weight to all the *mitzvot* of the Torah. As it is written: “You made known to them Your holy Shabbat, and You ordained for them laws, commandments and Torah” (*Nechemia* 9:14). This informs you that [the Shabbat] is equal in weight to all the *mitzvot* of the Torah.

“Honor your father and your mother” [is implied by the phrase] “To the end that you and your children may endure.”

“You shall not murder” [is implied by the phrase] “You will soon perish.” [This implies that] whoever murders will be killed.

“You shall not commit adultery” [is implied by the phrase] “So that you do not follow your heart and eyes.” R. Levi said: The heart and the eyes are the two procurers of sin. As it is written: “Give your mind to me, my son; let your eyes watch my ways” (*Mishlei* 23:26). The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If you give me your heart and your eyes then I shall know that you are mine.

“You shall not steal” [is implied by the phrase] “You shall gather in your grain” – and not the grain of your fellow.

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor” [is implied by the phrase] “I, the Lord your God.” And it is written: “But the Lord is truly God” (*Yirmiyahu* 10:10). What is “True (*emet*)”? R. Abun said: That means He is the living God (***e****lokim*)and King (***me****lekh*)of the Universe. R. Levi said: The Holy One, blessed be He, said: If you bore false witness against your friend, I deem it as if you had borne false witness against Me, that I did not create the heavens and the earth.

“You shall not covet your neighbor’s house” [is implied by the phrase] “And inscribe them on the doorposts of your house” – your house and not your friend’s house.

This passage from the *Yerushalmi* reflects the two approaches that we mentioned above: the technical approach and the fundamental approach.

R. Shimon follows the technical approach, stating that we recite these two passages simply because they mention lying down and rising up. R. Levi’s answer is that we recite these passages because the Ten Commandments are embodied in them. This approach stresses that the Ten Commandments are at the center of *keriat Shema*, and the three passages that we recite today are merely ancillary sections that follow the Ten Commandments.[[7]](#footnote-7) It should be noted that in R. Levi’s answer, he relates to the third passage – “The Lord spoke” – as well. He does this because if we disconnect from the technical approach and cross over to the fundamental approach, even the third passage can be considered an integral part of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*. Even though the elements of lying down and rising up are not mentioned in the third passage and it is found in an entirely different book of the Torah (*Bamidbar* rather than *Devarim*), its fundamental content meets the demands of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Despite all this, the practice of reciting the Ten Commandments as part of *keriat Shema* was fell by the wayside, apparently because of a concern that appears in both the *Bavli* and the *Yerushalmi*. We read in the *Talmud Bavli*:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Shmuel: Outside the Temple, also people wanted to do the same, but they were stopped on account of the insinuations of the heretics. (*Berakhot* 12a)

And in the *Yerushalmi* we read:

R. Matna and R. Shmuel bar Nachman said: By rights they should recite the verses of the Ten Commandments every day.[[9]](#footnote-9) And why do they not do so? On account of the claims of the heretics. So that people should not have any cause to say that only these [Ten Commandments] were given to Moshe on Mount Sinai. (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:5)

**Reciting the Story of Balak and Bil’am**

Following the discussion of the possibility of reciting the Ten Commandments as part of *keriat Shema*, both Talmuds stress that there was the potential to insert other passages from the Torah into *keri’at Shema* as well. The *Bavli* states:

R. Abahu ben Zutrati said in the name of R. Yehuda bar Zevida: They wanted to include **the section of Balak** in the *Shema*, but they did not do so because it would have meant too great a burden for the congregation. Why [did they want to insert it]? … Rather, said R. Yose bar Avin, because it contains the verse: “They crouch, **they lie down** like a lion, like the king of beasts; **who dare rouse them**?” (*Bamidbar* 24:9). (*Berakhot* 12b)

Rashi comments on this passage:

“They crouch, they lie down” – Because it is similar to “when you lie down and when you get up.” For the Holy One, blessed be He, protects us when we lie down and when we get up, [allowing us] to lie down tranquilly and quietly like a lion. (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 24:9, s.v. *kara shakhav*)

It seems from Rashi’s interpretation that the connection to *keriat Shema* is a technical one: the verse mentions the concept of lying down.

However, the *Yerushalmi* cites three distinct reasons for reciting this section of the Torah:

R. Shmuel bar Nachman [said] in the name of R. Yehuda bar Zevuda: By rights they should recite the passages of Balak and Bil’am every day. And why do they not recite them? **In order not to trouble the congregation**. R. Chuna said: Because that passage contains a reference to lying down and rising up. R. Yose ben R. Bun said: Because that passage contains a reference to **the Exodus from Egypt and to kingship**. R. Eliezer said: Because the story **is referred to in the Torah, in the Prophets, and in the Writings**.[[10]](#footnote-10) (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:5)

The first reason cited in the *Yerushalmi* is parallel to the reason cited in the *Bavli*,[[11]](#footnote-11) following Rashi’s interpretation. The third reason also seems to reflect a technical consideration, since the fact that the story is mentioned in all three major sections of the *Tanakh* does have representative significance. In any case, the middle reason is more fundamental, relating to actual content: the Exodus and God’s kingship. These principles are intrinsically important insofar as they are connected on a fundamental level to *keriat Shema*. We will deal with these principles in depth in a forthcoming *shiur*, God willing.

**Conclusion**

We can take away from this discussion that the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* is, in the most basic sense, an obligation to recite verses from the Torah twice daily. As the Torah states: “Take to heart these words… Impress them upon your children. Recite them… when you lie down and when you get up.” The Sages were given the freedom to establish which particular passages should be recited, based on various considerations, as we explained above.

In the upcoming *shiur*, we will deal in depth with Rambam’s position on the question, “What is *keriat Shema*?” – the question that we addressed in the first two *shiurim* of this series.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. We will address the full content of this verse in a forthcoming *shiur*, when we discuss the *mitzva* of recognizing the oneness of God in detail. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. As we presented earlier, it may be that the obligation to recite the *Shema* includes the third verse as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Just as the first passage states, “Take to heart **these words**... Impress them upon your children. **Recite them… when you lie down and when you get up**,” the second passage states, “Therefore impress **these My words**… and teach them to your children – **reciting them… when you lie down and when you get up**.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Rambam, *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot* 3, as well as a forthcoming *shiur* that will deal with the *mitzva* of Torah study. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This concept arises in several different areas of *halakha*, referred to as *mesaram la-chakhamim* (literally, “they were transferred to the Sages”). In the Talmud it is found in only two places: in the discussion of the parameters of *melakha* (forbidden labor) on *Chol Ha-Mo’ed* (*Chagiga* 18a) and in the discussion of the obligation to care for a firstborn animal (*Bekhorot* 26b). However, the *Rishonim* expanded the use of the concept, applying the principle on numerous occasions.

   An interesting expression of this phenomenon can be found in the following excerpt from Ritva’s commentary: “And Scripture transferred all of these things to the Sages, **like most of the laws of the Torah**” (Ritva, *Rosh Hashana* 12a). See also *Yere’im*, who wrote that the list of prohibited labors on Shabbat was established by the Sages, who were permitted to do so because the Torah transferred that right to them. Many *Rishonim* wrote this as well in relation to the parameters of the laws of testimony, in particular with regard to the trustworthiness of a single female witness (see Ritva, *Yevamot* 88a). In our case as well, it seems more reasonable to us that the Torah gave the Sages the right to decide which passages should be inscribed in *tefillin* and *mezuzot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. An interesting testimony regarding the existence of this approach can be found in a *midrash* in *Sifrei*, on the verse, “Impress them upon your children,” as it discusses the passages that must be “impressed” (i.e., the *Shema*) in relation to the passages that must be inscribed upon the *tefillin*:

   Another interpretation: “Impress them upon your children” – one must impress these passages, whereas one does not impress “Consecrate to Me every first-born” (*Shemot* 13:2) and “And when the Lord has brought you” (*Shemot* 13:11). One might have thought that since “The Lord spoke” (*Bamidbar* 15:1; the third passage of the *Shema*) is not inscribed on *tefillin* but is included in the command to impress, “Consecrate to Me” and “And when the Lord has brought you” – which are inscribed on *tefillin* – should certainly be included in the command to impress. So the Torah states “Impress them”: These passages are included in the command to impress and “Consecrate to Me” and “And when the Lord has brought you” are not included in the command to impress. But still I ask: If “The Lord spoke” – which was preceded by other *mitzvot* – is included in the command to impress, certainly the Ten Commandments – which were not preceded by other *mitzvot* – should be included in the command to impress. Perhaps this can be negated by an a fortiori argument: If “Consecrate to Me every first-born” and “And when the Lord has brought you” – which are inscribed on *tefillin* – are not included in the command to impress, the Ten Commandments – which are not inscribed on *tefillin* – should certainly not be included in the command to impress. But “The Lord spoke” disproves this argument against the inclusion of the Ten Commandments, since even though neither of these passages are inscribed on *tefillin*, they may be included in the command to impress. So the Torah states “Impress them upon your children” – these passages are included in the command to impress and the Ten Commandments are not included in the command to impress. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The connection between the three passages of the *Shema* and the Ten Commandments is not entirely clear, as one can see from the passage in the *Yerushalmi*. Therefore, it seems that the choice of these three passages as the text of the *Shema* preceded their connection to the Ten Commandments. As we will explain later, each of the three passages has its own importance within the general framework of the *Shema*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See *Penei Moshe*, who suggested an alternate reading of the beginning of the passage in the *Yerushalmi*: “Why do they recite these **three** passages every day?” Nonetheless, in my humble opinion, this version of the text is impossible in light of R. Shimon’s answer. According to R. Shimon, we recite these passages because they mention lying down and rising up; in the third passage, lying down and rising up are not mentioned at all.

   Therefore, it seems that we should refrain from altering our version of the text. We must thus maintain that according to R. Shimon the discussion is limited to the first two passages, and that the third passage is not an integral part of *keriat Shema*. However, according to R. Levi, even the third passage is part of the discussion by dint of its content, which mentions the Ten Commandments. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Based on what arises from these sources, the *Bavli* interprets that the custom to include the Ten Commandments as part of *keriat Shema* began in the Temple, and they requested permission to extend the practice to outside the Temple grounds. However, the *Yerushalmi* makes no mention of this point and does not distinguish between within the Temple grounds and outside this area. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Penei Moshe* writes:

    “In the Torah, in the Prophets and in the Writings” – It is one of the Omnipresent’s acts of kindness on our behalf that He did not desire to listen to their advice. In the **Prophets**: “My people, remember what Balak king of Moav plotted against you, and how Bil’am son of Be’or responded to him” (*Mikha* 6:5). In the Writings, in *Nechemia*: “At that time they read to the people from the Book of Moshe… that no Ammonite or Moabite might ever enter… since they did not meet… and hired Bil’am against them to curse them; but our God turned the curse into a blessing” (*Nechemia* 13:1). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. The differences between the *Bavli* and the *Yerushalmi* can be found in the opinion of the *Amora* from the land of Israel, R. Yose bar Avin (i.e., R. Yose ben R. Bun). It was commonplace for the details of messages that traveled by word of mouth from the land of Israel to Babylonia to change numerous times, especially with regard to names of people. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)