YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

***Shiur* #14:**

**Loving God (IV): From Love to Redemption**

**The Blessingsof *Keriat Shema***

The *mishna* in *Berakhot* states:

In the morning, one recites two blessings before it and one after it. In the evening, one recites two blessings before it and two after it. (*Berakhot* 11a)

The *Yerushalmi* explains:

R. Yose bar Avin said in the name of R. Yehoshua ben Levi: It is on account of the verse, “I praise You seven times each day for Your just rules” (*Tehillim* 119:164). (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:5)[[1]](#footnote-1)

*Midrash Tehillim* provides a similar explanation:

As Scripture says, “I praise You seven times each day.” R. Yehoshua ben Levi taught: These are the seven *mitzvot* of *keriat Shema*: *Yotzer* (“Who forms [the radiant lights]”); *Ahava Rabba* (“[You have loved us with] great love”); *Shema*; “If, then, you obey”; “The Lord spoke”; *Emet Ve-Yatziv* (“True and firm”); and *Ga’al Yisrael* (“Who redeemed Israel”)… Another interpretation: “I praise You seven times each day” refers to the seven concluding [blessings] of *keriat Shema*, morning and evening. As we learn in the *mishna*: “In the morning, one recites two blessings before it and one after it. In the evening, one recites two blessingsbefore it and two after it” – making seven. (*Midrash Tehillim* 6:1)

According to one view, the rabbinic enactment of the blessings of *keriat Shema*[[2]](#footnote-2) creates a whole unit of “*keriat Shema* and its blessings,” which is alluded to in the verse, “I will praise You seven times each day.” According to the other approach, this enactment creates a unit from the blessings of *keriat Shema* that are recited in the morning and in the evening. In either case, the blessings of *keriat Shema* constitute an essential unit of praise that is closely connected to the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*.

In both the morning and the evening, we recite two blessings before *keriat Shema* – *Birkat Ha-Me’orot* (the blessing of the radiant lights) and *Birkat Ahava* (the blessing of love) – and one after it – *Birkat Ge’ula* (the blessing of redemption). In the evening, we add the blessing of *Hashkiveinu* (“Help us lie down”), which is the blessing of night and sleep.

The two blessings that precede *keriat Shema* prepare one for loving God, using the two paths that we presented in the previous *shiurim* (based on *Tehillim* 19 and Rambam’s explanation): contemplation of the universe and contemplation of Torah and the *mitzvot*.

The *Rishonim* already addressed the connection between the blessings of *keriat Shema* and *Tehillim* 19. *Orchot Chayim* states:

R. Asher wrote: That is why *Ahavat Olam* was placed next to *Yotzer Ha-Me’orot* – since it mentions within it the name of the Holy One, blessed be He, and the giving of the Torah, which shines brighter than all the radiant lights, since the sun only shines during the day, while the Torah shine during the day and the night. **It adopted the approach of [*Tehillim* 19, which features the verse,] “The heavens declare the glory of God,” which mentions the radiant lights, and juxtaposes it with [the verse,] “The Torah of the Lord is perfect.”** Then [we read,] “The decrees (*edut*)of the Lord are enduring,” meaning that we must attest (*le-ha’id*)to His true oneness. (*Orchot Chayim* 1, *Hilkhot* *Barekhu*)

*Orchot Chayim* writes here that *Chazal* adopted the approach of *Tehillim* 19, and it is through this approach that we come to recognize God’s oneness in *keriat Shema*.

I would add that the purpose of these blessings is to prepare and guide a person by way of these two blessings. These blessings deal with the paths through which one can know and recognize the One who spoke and brought the world into being. Through that knowledge, love will follow. That is why these two blessings were instituted – so that one can know how to come to love God when he reaches *keriat Shema*.

*Birkat Ha-Me’orot* deals with contemplation of God’s creation: “How many are the things You have made, O Lord… the earth is full of Your creations.” The focus on the lights of the morning and the evening touches upon a point of uncertainty and error that often enters the hearts of human beings, who ascribe power to these sources of light. We have already seen this notion in *Chazal*’s statements about Avraham, and we recognize this phenomenon – the ubiquity of sun- and moon-worshipers – from the course of world history.

*Birkat Ha-Me’orot* serves to teach and emphasize that the lights, as well as the entire universe surrounding them, were formed and created by God, who gives light to the earth and its inhabitants.

This is the meaning of *Chazal*’s statement in *Berakhot*:

It was taught in the name of R. Meir: At the time when the sun rises and all the kings of the East and West put their crowns upon their heads and bow down to the sun, the Holy One, blessed be He, becomes at once angry. (*Berakhot* 7a)

During those first three hours of the day, when the world bows down to the sun, the people of Israel accept upon themselves the yoke of God’s kingship with love. The nation of Israel recognizes that God formed the radiant lights and brings on the evening.

In my humble opinion, this also explains the great value of praying in the manner of the *vatikin* – as soon as the sun begins to rise – as the verse states, “Let them fear You as long as the sun shines” (*Tehillim* 72:5). Whether we understand that the practice of praying “*vatikin*” is primarily connected to the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema* or if we understand that it is primarily connected to reciting the *Amida*, it seems to me that the focus is on the meticulous manner in which the *vatikin* approach the obligation to accept God’s kingship, standing before God in prayer at the time when the kings of the East are bowing down to the sun. As they bow to the sun, we demonstrate that we believe only in God and turn only to Him.

The blessing of *Ahava Rabba* (or *Ahavat Olam*, “everlasting love”) deals with God’s abundant love for the nation of Israel, His chosen people. However, the central content of this love is the Torah and the *mitzvot*. Thus we recite in our prayers on every festival: “You have chosen us from among all peoples. You have loved and favored us…. You have made us holy through Your commandments. You have brought us near, our King, to Your service.” Because of this, the Torah and the *mitzvot* are the primary content of *Birkat Ahava*: “Instill in our hearts the desire to understand and discern, to listen, learn and teach, to observe, perform and fulfill all the teachings of Your Torah in love.”

*Birkat Ahava* is referred to as *Birkat Ha-Torah* (“The blessing over the Torah”) in the *Yerushalmi*:

The officer said to them, “Recite one blessing,” and they did so. What blessing did they recite? R. Matna said in the name of Shemuel: **It was the blessing over the Torah**. But did they not recite the blessing of *Yotzer Ha-Me’orot*? R. Shemuel the brother of R. Berekhya said: The lights had not yet emerged, and [you say they should] recite *Yotzer Ha-Me’orot*? (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:5)

The *Bavli* uses similar language:

R. Yehuda said in the name of Shemuel: If one rose early to study [Torah] before he had recited the *Shema*, he must recite the blessing [over the Torah]. But if he had already recited the *Shema*, he need not recite a blessing, because he has already become exempt by reciting *Ahava Rabba*.[[3]](#footnote-3) (*Berakhot* 11b)

Thus, the two blessings of *keri’at Shema* that precede it deal with paths to loving God, His creation and the Torah, and prepare the one who recites them for recognizing the oneness of God and loving Him.

**The Words of My Mouth and the Dialogue of My Heart**

To complete this discussion, we must add that *Tehillim* 19 contains three main sections: “The heavens declare the glory of God” (creation); “The Torah of the Lord is perfect” (Torah); and an additional section – “Your servant pays them heed… O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”

*Roke’ach* addresses the connection between this third section of the psalm and the blessings of *keriat Shema* in his commentary on the *siddur*:

Since David first mentioned the radiant lights – “He placed in them a tent for the sun” – and then the Torah, and then “my rock and my redeemer,” therefore they instituted first *Birkat Ha-Me’orot*, *Ahava Rabba*, and *keriat Shema*, **and afterward the Exodus from Egypt, the blessing of *Ga’al Yisrael* and the entire prayer service until “[May…] the dialogue of my heart [be acceptable to You], O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.”** (*Roke’ach*, Commentary on the *Siddur*, psalm 19, p. 83)

First we will briefly explain the third section of the psalm, and then we will address the overall meaning of the psalm, as well as its connection to the general framework of *keriat Shema* and prayer.

The Psalmist declares how careful he is in his fulfillment of God’s *mitzvot* and requests assistance in preventing him from stumbling due to mistakes and errors. He then adds a request that God keep him from committing willful sins, so that he can remain innocent. The last verse in the chapter, “May the words of my mouth and the dialogue of my heart be acceptable to You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer,” constitutes a prayer that all his requests will be acceptable to God.

The Psalmist distinguishes between “the words of my mouth” and “the dialogue of my heart.” The words of one’s mouth, of course, are the content that one speaks during his prayers, which he requests will be acceptable to God. But King David, the author of this psalm, does not suffice with this, adding a separate request that the dialogue of his heart be acceptable to God as well.

What is the dialogue of the heart (*hegyon ha-lev*)? The term *higayon*, in its appearances in the *Tanakh*, usually refers to speech or pronunciation.[[4]](#footnote-4) Thus, the parallel of the words of the mouth is the dialogue of the heart. What value does the dialogue of one’s heart add to the words of one mouth?

On the simple level, the dialogue of the heart derives from a deeper place within one’s soul. It is dialogue that is accompanied by one’s focused intent, rather than hurried, offhanded speech. One cannot say of such dialogue, “That people… honored Me with its lips, but has kept its heart far from Me” (*Yeshayahu* 29:13).

We can distinguish between the words of the mouth and the dialogue of the heart on a more internal level as well. The words of the mouth consist of logical, organized, and well-thought-out arguments. These arguments proceed in a reasonable order; the first things go first and the last things go last. Requests and thanksgivings fit into a carefully organized framework, their details meticulously arranged. Everything ties together as one clear, coherent corpus. One who is able to articulate his prayer through the words of his mouth is in a state of peace and inner tranquility, as he presents his pre-arranged prayer before God.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In contrast, the dialogue of the heart is stormier, noisier, and less organized and structured than the words of the mouth. This lack of order derives from both our own limited ability to organize our thoughts and reflections, as well as the depth of the subject of our prayers, since the issues that concern us are complicated and involved. As a result, it is exceedingly difficult to organize our thoughts into a clear corpus of logical arguments.

Thus, this dynamic represents a certain disconnective element between the heart and the mouth. This stems not only from the fact that the heart prefers to stay hidden, but because the concepts in question are broader than what the mouth, with its limited abilities, can possibly contain.

After praying that “the words of my mouth be acceptable to You,” he then requests one more thing from God: Beyond what I have requested thus far regarding “the words of my mouth,” I request that the “dialogue of my heart” be acceptable to You as well.

**O Lord, My Rock and My Redeemer**

We will now explain the end of the verse: “O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” The phrase “**O Lord, my rock (*tzuri*)**” can be interpreted as a statement reinforcing the fact that God is the Creator of the world. We read in *Berakhot*:

“There is no holy one like the Lord, truly, there is none beside You; there is no rock (*tzur*) like our God” (*Shemuel I* 2:2). What does “there is no *tzur* like our God” mean? There is no artist (*tzayar*) like our God. (*Berakhot* 10a)

Thus, the word *tzur* can allude to God’s role as an artist or an artisan in creating the world. As we stress in *Birkat Ha-Me’orot*: “Who forms light and creates darkness… and continually renews the work of creation, day after day.”

The existence of creation is dependent on the existence of the covenant between God and humanity: “As surely as I have established My covenant with day and night – the laws of heaven and earth” (*Yirmiyahu* 33:25). The existence of creation requires that the Torah and the *mitzvot* be fulfilled by human beings. This is the essence of *Birkat Ahava*/*Birkat Ha-Torah*: “For they are our life and the length of our days.”

The phrase “**and my redeemer (*ve-go’ali*)**” refers to the redemption of man and the world. This is man’s ability to stand and live before God with the utmost intimacy, like Adam in the Garden of Eden and like the righteous people who will one day sit with their crowns on their heads feasting on the brightness of the *Shekhina* (*Berakhot* 17a). The redemptive reality is that God will appear in every aspect of life – in the broad elements and in the narrow details – in the wondrous harmony of love and intimacy with Him. It will include the integration of creation and Torah, of heaven and earth.

This is what we say on Rosh Hashana, when the solitary individual and the entire Jewish People together crown God as King over us. This crowning is accompanied by a powerful sense of hope that a day will come when every living creature and every being in existence will join together in calling for the King of the world to be crowned.

Through the recognition and acceptance of God’s kingship and of His role as the Creator (as we invoke in the *Malkhuyot* blessing on Rosh Hashana), as well as of His role in sustaining and controlling His world (as in the *Zikhronot* blessing), the world can achieve redemption. This redemption comes through God’s revelation to the world by giving it the Torah and the *mitzvot*, which represent the portal to the redemption of man and the world.

Thus, when the light of God and His *Shekhina* illuminate the entire world, removing all the hazy doubts from the hearts of its inhabitants, the great shofar of the coming redemption and of the return of the strayed and the expelled will sound (as in the *Shofarot* blessing). “For every eye shall behold the Lord’s return to Zion” (*Yeshayahu* 52:8).

**Redemption Through the Blessings of *Keriat Shema***

The blessings of *keriat Shema* and of the *Amida*, which have been established as part of our daily routine, include three fundamental blessings relating to God’s creation and the Torah. It is through these blessings that the redemption can come.

This redemption expresses itself in two ways, according to *Roke’ach*: the reference to redemption within the blessings of *keriat Shema*, i.e., *Ga’al Yisrael*; and the reference to redemption that concludes the *Amida*, i.e., “May the words of my mouth and the dialogue of my heart be acceptable to You, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.” The redemption of the blessings of *keriat Shema* refers primarily to the large-scale redemption – the redemption from Egypt, representing the formation of the nation of Israel as God’s nation. Then comes the personal prayer of the individual, who accepts the Torah and the *mitzvot* with love and serves God through Torah and prayer.[[6]](#footnote-6) By standing before God, a person comes before Him wielding the words of his mouth and the dialogue of his heart, asking to be redeemed.

The importance of juxtaposing *Ga’al Yisrael* and the *Amida*, simultaneously juxtaposing the concepts ofredemption and prayer, is highlighted in the *Yerushalmi*:

Immediately following [the blessing of] redemption is the [*Amida*] prayer, [as it is written:] “May the words of my mouth be acceptable.” What is written afterward? “May the Lord answer you in time of trouble” (*Tehillim* 20:2)…. R. Ami said: Anyone who does not immediately follow [the blessing of] redemption with the [*Amida*] prayer, to what is he analogous? To a king’s dear friend who came and knocked on the king’s door. When [the king] came out to determine what he wanted, he found that he had distanced himself; [the king then] distanced himself even further. (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:1)

In light of all we have said thus far, it seems that we must interpret the passage above as follows. A person who contemplates God’s creation and the Torah accepts upon himself the yoke of God’s kingship with love, through *keriat Shema*. Through this process, he understands and internalizes the idea of Israel’s redemption in Egypt, when the nation of Israel was chosen to be God’s nation. At this stage, a person can realize his love of God through the service of prayer. Through this connection forged between man and history and between man and the eternal tradition of the Jewish People as a whole, it is guaranteed that his prayer will be answered: “May the Lord answer you in time of trouble, the name of Ya’akov’s God keep you safe” (*Tehillim* 20:2).

The *Yerushalmi* adds that God expects that one who declares his love for the King and proclaims his faith in Israel’s redemption, by virtue of that choice and that love that God showered upon Israel, cannot stop there. God expects that he will join in the chorus of those who intone, “May the words of my mouth….” When a person does this, he as an individual and the entire world as a whole can progress from the redemption of Egypt to the complete redemption that is to come, when the promise of “The Lord will reign forever and ever” will be fulfilled. But if he does not do this, it appears as if he doubts the redemption of Egypt and does not aspire to the supreme values of loving God and attaining intimacy with Him.

We read in *Berakhot*: “Who inherits the World to Come? The one who juxtaposes [the blessing of] redemption and the evening prayer” (*Berakhot* 4b). Rabbeinu Yona challenges this premise: “It must be examined: Can it be that because one juxtaposes redemption and prayer he merits so much that he inherits the World to Come?” (*Talmidei Rabbeinu Yona*, *Berakhot* 2b [pages of the Rif]). Based on what we have established thus far, it seems that if one recognizes and loves God and understands the value of God’s selection of Israel as His nation and our eventual redemption at God’s hands, he will eagerly hope and pray that the world will advance toward its complete reality. If one does this, he will certainly inherit the World to Come, which represents, in its essence, the reality of supreme intimacy with God: “Feasting on the brightness of the *Shekhina*.”

We read further in *Berakhot* regarding the reward due for one who juxtaposes redemption and prayer:

R. Yose ben Elyakim testified in the name of the holy community of Jerusalem: If one juxtaposes redemption and prayer, he will not meet with any mishap for the whole of the day. R. Zeira said: This is not so! For I did juxtapose, and did meet with a mishap. They asked him: What was your mishap? That you had to carry a myrtle branch into the king’s palace? That was no mishap, for in any case you would have had to pay something in order to see the king! For R. Yochanan said: A man should always be eager to run to see the kings of Israel. And not only to see the kings of Israel, but also to see the kings of the gentiles, so that, if he is found worthy, he may be able to distinguish between the kings of Israel and the kings of the gentiles.[[7]](#footnote-7) (*Berakhot* 9b)

If one juxtaposes redemption and prayer and desires the advancement of the world through the revelation of God’s kingship to all of its inhabitants, if he hopes that the world will be perfected under the sovereignty of the Almighty, it is guaranteed that God will protect him and ensure that he will never be harmed.

In the passage in *Berakhot*, it becomes clear that sometimes this can be a long and winding process. Sometime one must start by running to see the kings of the gentiles and only afterward the kings of Israel will reveal themselves. While it is guaranteed that one will not be harmed and one will merit redemption and the opportunity to feast on the brightness of the *Shekhina*, sometimes the road to this reward can be very convoluted. But when that road ends, we will find “the kings of Israel” – the revelation of God’s kingship throughout the world.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. See Rashi, *Berakhot* 11a. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The halakhic status of the blessings of *keriat Shema* is debatable. Are they significant only in that they are connected to the fulfillment of the *mitzva* of *keriat Shema*, or do they have independent significance as well? Similarly, we can ask whether these blessings possess a certain aspect of *birkat ha-mitzvot*. We will not discuss these questions in this context. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compare the language of this passage to that of the *Yerushalmi*:

   Shemuel said: [Concerning] one who rises early to study [Torah], [if it is] before his recitation of the *Shema*, he must recite the blessings [over the Torah]. [But if it is] after his recitation of the *Shema*, he does not need to recite the blessings. R. Ba said: But this is only if he studied [Torah] immediately. (*Yerushalmi* 1:5)

   See *Tosafot*, *Berakhot* 11b, who explain the matter at length. In my humble opinion, there is no other *Birkat Ha-Torah* in the *Yerushalmi*. The matter requires further study, but this is not the place for it. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For example, “But recite it (*ve-hagita bo*)day and night” (*Yehoshua* 1:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. In rabbinic literature, the phrase “arrange one’s prayer” appears frequently. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Rambam’s comment in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvot*, Positive Commandment 5: “The *Sifrei* states, ‘“serving Him” refers to **prayer**.’ The Sages also stated, ‘“serving Him” refers to **Torah study**.’” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. There is a parallel passage in the *Yerushalmi*:

   And anyone who immediately follows [the blessing of] redemption with the [*Amida*] prayer, the *satan* will not prosecute [him] that day. R. Ze’eira said: I immediately followed redemption with prayer, yet I was drafted into service to transport myrtle to the palace! They said to him: Master, this is a benefit! There are people who pay money to view the palace! (*Yerushalmi Berakhot* 1:1) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)