



RABBI JUDAH

MISCHEL

Mashpiah, OU-NCSY

Executive Director, Camp HASC

Author of *Baderech: Along the Path of Teshuva* (Mosaica 2021)

Eikev: Know!

Rebbe Yisrael Alter, the Beis Yisroel of Gur, zy'a, was fond of repeating a *m'aseh* about his great-grandfather, Reb Yitzchok Meir, the *Chidushei haRi'm*:

One day, a self-described non-believing *maskil*, rebellious and arrogant, came before the *Chidushei haRi'm*. This man gloated that although he had done many *aveiros*, indulging all of his wants and desires, he lives a happy, fulfilled life, is wealthy, has honor and is in good health. With a cynical and mocking tone, he challenged the great sage: "Rabbi, does it not explicitly state in the *Shema*,

הַשְּׁמִרָה לָכֶם פֶּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסָרְתֶם וְעַבַדְתֶּם
אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים... וְחָרָה אַפָּי ה' בְּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת
הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהִאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת-
יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מִהֲרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטְּבָה,

'Beware lest your heart be lured away and you turn and worship alien gods.... For then the wrath of Hashem will be kindled against you, and He will close off the heavens, and there will be no rain, and the ground will not give its produce, and you will perish quickly from upon the good land that God has given you.' ... But look at me! I have all I could possibly want and more. The Torah's claims are nothing but empty threats and false promises!"

The *Chidushei haRi'm* sighed, and then spoke: "Since you are familiar with the

contents of the *pesukim*, it is clear that you must have recited the *Shema* at least once in your lifetime. Know that this is an unimaginable *zechus* that carries inestimable power and supernal value. The merit of saying *Shema even once* is beyond measure and comprehension — and how much more so for you, who can quote scripture and verse by heart! So *of course* you are blessed with all the good in the world."

This Shabbos, we are introduced to the second chapter of the *Shema*, which both enumerates the fundamental elements of our faith and obligations and presents the rewards of fulfilling the Torah's commandments (as well as the opposite repercussions).

The *Shema* expresses *yichud Hashem*, the indivisible Oneness of our Creator. It is our theological mission statement and forms the essential core of our belief and life, expressing the essence of what it means to be a Jew. It is the beginning and end of *Yiddishkeit*, the first prayer we hear as infants, and traditionally, a Jew aspires that it be his or her last words on earth.

Rav Adin Steinsaltz, zy'a, elaborates:

"For the Jewish People, the *Shema* is a call, a slogan, a sign of identification and an expression of great emotion. It is a declaration of bond, of principles and identity... (that are) with us from the very beginning of our history. These words have

accompanied our people for thousands of years in our homeland and in exile, in times of peace and war, in the gas chambers and along with our cries of triumph.

“The Shema is our ‘password’; it is how Jews recognized each other — despite geographical, linguistic and cultural differences. The Shema is a declaration of connection, of faith and of confidence. It is a promise and a call: ‘We are here, we belong, we continue, we have a past and a future.’”

And we should know that the mitzvah of reciting Shema is not only a source of spiritual and cultural strength, but even physical strength, as our holy sages testify (*Sotah*, 42a):

אָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מְשׁוּם רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּן יוֹחִי
אָמַר לָהֶן הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא לְיִשְׂרָאֵל: אֶפְיָלוּ לֹא
קִיִּימְתֶם אֶלָּא קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע שְׁחֲרִית וְעַרְבִית, אִי
אַתֶּם נִמְסְרִין בְּיָדָם.

“Rebbe Yochanan said in the name of Rebbe Shimon bar Yochai: The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to the Jewish People: Even if you have not fulfilled any mitzvah but reciting the Shema in the morning and evening, you will not be delivered into the hands of your enemies.”

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In 1941, Rebbe Yosef Yitzchok, the Friediker Lubavitcher Rebbe, instituted a program that provided Jewish children from New York City public schools with an hour of weekly Jewish study. Every Wednesday afternoon, volunteers, *talmidim* from Yeshivah Tomchei Temimim would interrupt their own learning for several hours, travel across town to various public schools, and meet the kids during their club hour. There they would escort them

to local shuls where they would learn the basics of Yiddishkeit together.

One *masmid*, a serious and dedicated budding *talmid chacham* wrote to the Rebbe, asking to be excused from participating in the program. He felt that his time might be used more effectively in the *beis medrash*, and that the shlep across town was a waste of time in his own case... “For, how much are we actually achieving with the students?”

The Friediker’s reply was direct and clear: “Know that on Wednesday afternoons, all of the souls in Gan Eden from throughout all of history, including Moshe Rabeinu himself, are envious of you, jealous that you have the awesome *zechus* each week to say *Shema Yisrael* with a Jewish child. The *neshamos* in Gan Eden no longer have the opportunity to interact with Jewish children and draw them closer to their Father in Heaven. Do you have any idea what the *tzadikim* in Gan Eden would give for the opportunity to say Shema with a Yid even once!?”

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If someone who aspires to a life of *kefirah* and rebelliousness benefits just from being familiar with the contents of Shema, how great must the merit be for those who strive to live with Hashem’s will! Such is the perspective of the *tzadikim*, who know the value of our prayer, our Torah...and our people.

May we appreciate and savor every Kriyas Shema with our children or in our daily services, morning and evening; may we know the value, power and potential of saying the Shema even once with a Yid — including ourselves! ■