

I have Come Now
Vayechi, 5782
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This week our daf yomi study group began a new tractate, Megillah. We very quickly encountered a text in tractate Megillah that teaches us that a person who overcomes with fear should recite the Shema:

Ravina said: Learn from this incident that with regard to one who is frightened for no apparent reason, although he does not see anything menacing, his guardian angel sees it, and therefore he should take steps in order to escape the danger. The Gemara asks: What is his remedy? He should recite Shema, which will afford him protection. And if he is standing in a place of filth, where it is prohibited to recite verses from the Torah, he should distance himself four cubits from his current location in order to escape the danger. And if he is not able to do so, let him say the following incantation: The goat of the slaughterhouse is fatter than I am, and if a calamity must fall upon something, it should fall upon it (Megillah, 3a).

Reciting Shema is what a Jew traditionally does in moments of fear, danger, and prior to death. Perhaps the most famous time of all when Shema was recited in such a situation is when Rabbi Akiva recited it as he was being executed by the Romans for teaching Torah:

When they took Rabbi Akiva out to be executed, it was time for the recitation of Shema (zeman keriat shema haytah). And they were raking his flesh with iron combs, and he was reciting Shema, thereby accepting upon himself the yoke of Heaven. His students said to him: Our teacher, even now, as you suffer, you recite Shema? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by the verse: With all your soul, meaning: Even if God takes your soul. I said to myself: When will the opportunity be afforded me to fulfill this verse? Now that it has been afforded me, shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged his uttering of the word: One, until his soul left his body as he uttered his final word: One. A voice descended from heaven and said: Happy are you, Rabbi Akiva, that your soul left your body as you uttered: One (Berachot, 61b).

In parashat Vayechi we are told of another scene in which Shema is recited at a seminal moment – but this time it is the backstory to the Shema itself. When Yaakov Avinu gathers his children together at the end of his life, the verse states:

“And Jacob called his sons and said, ‘Come together that I may tell you what is to befall you in days to come’” (49:1).

The text then goes on to recite the blessings that Yaakov gave to his children but it never states “what is to befall you in the days to come.”

The Talmud explains why and in doing so it teaches us the origin of the Shema:

Jacob wanted to reveal to his sons when the complete redemption would arrive at the end of days (see Daniel 12:13), but the Divine Presence abandoned him, rendering him unable to prophesy.

*He said: Perhaps the Divine Presence has abandoned me because, Heaven forbid, one of my descendants is unfit, as was the case with my grandfather Abraham, from whom Ishmael emerged, and like my father Isaac, from whom Esau emerged. His sons said to him: Hear Israel **Shema Yisrael**, our father, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One, **Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad**. They said: Just as there is only one God in your heart, so too, there is only one in our hearts. At that moment Jacob our father said in praise: Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom for ever and ever, as all his children were righteous, **Baruch shem kevod malchuto leolam vaed**” (Pesachim, 56a).*

This text records not only the origins of the Shema passage, but also the origins of the phrase that we customarily recite after the Shema—*Baruch shem kevod malchuto leolam vaed*. The Talmud explains:

The Rabbis said: What should we do? Shall we recite this verse? But Moses our teacher did not say it in the Torah as part of Shema. Shall we not recite it? But Jacob said it. In order to resolve this dilemma they established that this passage should be recited surreptitiously. Rabbi Yitzhak said that the school of Rabbi Ami said: This is analogous to the daughter of a king who smelled the fragrance of the dried spices stuck to the bottom of the pot and craved to eat them. What can she do? If she tells her servants to give it to her, she will be disgraced, as the dried spices are a contemptible food. However, if she does not say she wants to eat them, she will endure suffering. Her servants began to bring them to her surreptitiously. One should conduct himself in that manner in similar cases of uncertainty. 9Rabbi Abbahu said: The Sages instituted that the people should recite it aloud due to the grievance of the heretics. It was instituted to prevent the heretics from claiming that the Jews are surreptitiously reciting inappropriate statements. The Gemara adds: In Neharde'a, where there are no heretics, they recite it surreptitiously even now (Pesachim, 56a).

This begs the question: If this phrase *Baruch Shem* etc. was so powerful and special, so much so, that Yaakov recited it, then why didn't Moshe include it in the passage of the Torah following the Shema verse?

Rav Moshe Feinstein asks this question and explains:

The exclamation Baruch Shem etc. is one which is used by a person when he feels he must strengthen his faith...the generation of the Exodus, a generation that witnessed the miracles that took place in Egypt and went on to accept the Torah, had no need for such a tool to buoy their faith.

We can now understand why when we say Baruch Shem following the recital of Shema, we do so in an undertone. Since the recital of this prayer indicates a need for our faith in Hashem to be strengthened, it would be both embarrassing to ourselves as well as disrespectful to Hashem to say it aloud” (Darash Moshe, volume 2, 83-84).

Rav Moshe Feinstein is teaching that the phrase *Baruch Shem* is meant to strengthen one's faith. The Shema is a declaration of our faith in Hashem; of our willingness to submit to the sovereignty of our Creator. But not all of us are always so strong in our faith. In the darkest and most challenging moments of life, our faith wavers. We are unsure of the

Divine. We are uncertain of our Creator. We are uncertain of our path. But then we recite Baruch Shem. When we do so, we are reminded of Yaakov Avinu. His faith also wavered. Despite the fact that Hashem had promised that his children would be redeemed, Yaakov was unsure if his children would continue on his path of serving Hashem. When he realized that all was going to be ok, he declared Baruch Shem. Nowadays, when we declare Baruch Shem every single day of our lives, we are drawing strength from Yaakov's situation and reminding ourselves to have faith in Hashem and not to waver

Thus, Baruch Shem is a phrase meant to strengthen our faith. By strengthening our faith, we are able to get through life's most challenging times. Faith in Gd reminds us that we should follow the path of Hashem and not get distracted from that mission. It is a reminder to have perspective and hope in the future.

There are other ways to strengthen ourselves in challenging times.

For me the most powerful way is through daily and consistent study of Torah. By studying Torah in a scheduled manner in a community of friends, we place Torah at the center of our lives. In doing so we are declaring that the values of Torah are our guidepost and that we have an eternal guide to life's thorniest questions.

The Talmud in tractate Megillah tells us that Joshua was nearly sentenced to death for missing one night of Torah study.

The Talmud tells us:

"And it came to pass when Joshua was by Jericho that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man stood over against him with his sword drawn in his hand. And Joshua went over to him and said to him: Are you for us, or for our adversaries? And he said, No, but I am captain of the host of the Lord, I have come now. And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and bowed down" (Joshua 5:13-14)... As for the angel's mission, the Gemara explains that the angel said to Joshua: Yesterday, i.e., during the afternoon, you neglected the afternoon daily offering due to the impending battle, and now, at night, you have neglected Torah study, and I have come to rebuke you. Joshua said to him: For which of these sins have you come? He said to him: I have come now (Atah bati), indicating that neglecting Torah study is more severe than neglecting to sacrifice the daily offering. Joshua immediately determined to rectify the matter, as the verses states: "And Joshua lodged that night" (Joshua 8:9) "in the midst of the valley [ha'emek]" (Joshua 8:13), and Rabbi Yoḥanan said: This teaches that he spent the night in the depths [be'umeka] of halakha, i.e., that he spent the night studying Torah with the Jewish people (Megillah, 31-b).

The angel who visited Joshua in this story and threatened him with his sword, did so because Joshua and the Jewish people neglected Torah study for a single night. There were extenuating circumstances. They missed a night of Torah study **while they were in the middle of fighting a battle that Gd had commanded them to fight; i.e. to conquer the land of Canaan.** But the fact that they were in a battle was not a satisfactory excuse for missing Torah study. Just the opposite. The message of this Talmudic teaching is that when

we go through life's battles we must have the Torah at the center of our lives—not on our periphery. We cannot skip Torah even for one night without faltering a little. The angel emphasized this by saying -- *I have come now (Atah bati)*. The angel did not come with his sword after the Jewish people skipped their daily offering. It was only when they skipped a night of Torah study that the angel came.

The German Tosafist, Rivan, asks a question about this passage: How does the verse *atah bati* imply that the angel was coming for the sin of neglecting Torah study? He answers that the same word *atah* is used in Devarim 31 in relation to the commandment to write a Torah scroll, as it states “*ve-atah kitvu lachem et hashirah hazot, and now you shall write for yourselves this song*” (Tosafot to Megillah, 3a, s.v. *atah bati*).

By saying *atah bati* the angel is referencing this verse in the Torah that describes Torah study as a song. The verse therefore is meant to remind us that Torah is the song of our lives intended to inspire us in life's most difficult moments. Sometimes when our spirits are down or the challenges seem overwhelming, we sing a song to lift us and center us. This is what the Torah is in our lives. It will always lift us and give us joy when life challenges us.

This message also relates back to the story of the Shema recited by Rabbi Akiva as he was being executed by the Romans.

The Ponovitcher Rav asked a question about this story. Why did the Talmud have to point out that Rabbi Akiva was being brought out to be executed at **the time of the recitation of Shema**? After all, a Jew will recite Shema when he is afraid – no matter whether or not it is the time of the Shema's recitation.

The Ponovitcher Rav explains that the reason why the story emphasized that Rabbi Akiva was brought out to be executed the time of reciting the Shema is because Rabbi Akiva was bound by halacha to recite Shema at that moment. But if it wasn't the time to recite Shema, then at the moment of execution, Rabbi Akiva would not have been reciting Shema, instead he would have been studying Torah. Torah study is the song of our lives -- the music that lifts us up and gives us the strength to face any situation, so of course Rabbi Akiva would have been studying Torah in his final moments (cited by Sruly Bornstein in his daf yomi shiur to Megillah, 3).

Recently a beloved member of our congregation passed away after a long illness. I remember visiting him the day before his death and seeing him start a new book about the teachings of Maimonides. This person surely knew that he would soon pass away, but as he died, he wanted to die studying Torah.

These two pillars -- faith in Hashem and study of Torah -- are the biggest source of spiritual strength in my life. They support me at all times and never disappoint me. I bless you all that you take on a serious commitment to Torah study in your life so that you too, can have the spiritual support that Torah study so generously bequeaths to all of us.

You can now watch a YouTube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah at:
https://youtu.be/SAg_VaSsbXk