

Hear, O' Yisrael: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the One and Only. (6:4)

Judaism's seminal verse, the *pasuk* that accompanies us as we end our sojourn in this world is: *Shema Yisrael: Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*; "Hear, O' Yisrael, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One." The *Tur Orach Chaim* 61 rules that one places his hand over his eyes when he recites the *Shema*. What is the significance of *Shema*, and why does one cover his eyes upon reciting it? In his preface, the *Kol Arye* observes that two of Hashem's *Sheimos*, Names, are seemingly contrary to one another. The name *Elokim/Elokeinu* is the Name that represents the Almighty's, *middah*, attribute, of *Din*, Strict Judgment. The Name 'Hashem', on the other hand, represents *Rachamim*, the *middah* of Mercy. To the casual observer, mercy and strict judgment are incompatible with one another. If this is the case, when we say Hashem *Elokeinu*, Hashem is our G-d, we seem to be making a statement that is, at best, ambiguous.

This is specifically what we are underscoring when we say *Shema Yisrael: Hashem/Mercy and Elokeinu/Din* are one and the same. True, at times Hashem appears to us as acting with mercy and, at times, He comes across as manifesting judgment, but we believe that everything – both what appears to be merciful and what appears to be harsh judgment – all emanates from the Name 'Hashem,' which represents Mercy.

We now understand why this verse has such overriding significance. It is our way of confirming that everything that Hashem does is inherently good – even if at the moment of our declaration it does not appear that way. As Yaakov *Avinu* was about to descend to *Mitzrayim*, Egypt, he was filled with a sense of trepidation. At that point, Hashem appeared to him and comforted him, saying, "I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall surely bring you up, and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes" (*Bereishis* 46:3,4). Concerning the last words, *V'Yosef yoshis yado al einecha*, the *Zohar HaKadosh* says, *Da raza d'krias Shema*, "This is the secret of *Krias Shema*." The *Kol Aryeh* explains that since *Krias Shema* expresses the *achdus*, unity, of Hashem, and *Elokeinu*, expresses His Mercy and Judgment, it is a concept that is often difficult to accept. In moments of serious travail, when one is going through a frightening, painful experience, believing that what he is seeing is an act of Justice, it is best that he cover his eyes and not look. Just believe. Our model is Yosef *HaTzaddik* who experienced one *tzarah*, adversity, after another. In the end, Hashem demonstrated that it all fit together to produce a happy ending.

Everyone has his/her own personal *Shema Yisrael* story in which what appeared to be adverse actually acted as the segue to comfort and joy, similar to the *Chevlei Moshiach*, the birth pangs of *Moshiach*. We are living in a time – the last century – that has witnessed the greatest cruelty and pain that the Jewish Nation has experienced from time immemorial. Even today, I write this *dvar Torah* as I am sitting isolated in my house, due to the raging virus that is decimating innocent people. We wonder why. We ask when it will all end? We understand that these are the birth pangs of *Moshiach*, but what does that mean?

The following “story” related by *Horav Yisrael Chortkover, zl*, to a delegation of Jews, *chassidim* from Germany, who turned to him for a message of hope and reassurance, as the Nazis were beginning their reign of terror, illuminates this concept: “There were once two powerful kings who fought and conquered the entire world until each dominated half of the world. Veritably, they each would have continued fighting against one another, but each always harbored a fear of defeat that deterred them from launching an offensive. One day, one of the kings had a son; the other had a daughter. Let the two royals marry, and the child born to them would one day rule the world.

“Great idea, once the couple would have a child. Unfortunately, the dreams of the two prospective grandfathers did not materialize, since the young couple remained childless. The finest doctors were summoned to find a cure to whatever was preventing the couple from producing an heir or heiress to the throne. Finally, one brilliant doctor promised a cure, but he identified one danger: the potential mother might die to the complications that were likely to arise in the course of the pregnancy.

“Understanding that their child was the whole point of the marriage, the couple acquiesced to the risk. The princess conceived and, during the course of the pregnancy, the doctor was called a number of times when a crisis arose. He succeeded each time in preventing a tragedy from occurring. Once the princess entered her ninth month, her pains increased in earnest, until they became almost unbearable. Panicking, she called for the doctor, ‘You must do something,’ she cried in agony. ‘Anything, as I cannot take this pain any longer!’ This time the doctor said, ‘I am terribly sorry. I am unable to help alleviate the pain. These pains are different than your previous ones. These pains are the real thing, the pangs of childbirth. The only panacea to your pain will be the birth of your child. You must suffer these pains if you want to give birth to your child.’”

The *Rebbe* looked at the delegation and sighed, “Do you understand the message? These are the birth pangs of *Moshiach*. They will subside when he arrives. May Hashem protect those who survive.”

Shema Yisrael connects us as a people. Jews estranged from Torah and *mitzvos* know that the *Shema* is our clarion call of unity. In one of the secular *kibbutzim* (*Shomer Ha'Tzair*), one of the girls “rebelled” against her family and somehow became a *baalas teshuvah* and returned to her religious heritage. She became engaged to a *ben Torah*, and together they decided to celebrate their wedding in the *kibbutz*. During the wedding, one of the senior guests, a member of another anti-religious *kibbutz*, asked one of the *kibbutzniks* who knew the bride and had seen her grow up, “How did you raise such a ‘flawed, shameless’ girl, who would humiliate all of you by attaching herself to such a foreign way of life?” The man replied, “It all began years ago when my daughter was but eight years old. My wife noticed a strange thing happening every night when she went to sleep. She would sit in bed, recite a few words, and go to sleep. This continued nightly for years.

“Finally, we asked our daughter what she was doing. She explained that one of her friends from the *kibbutz* had discovered an old book in her grandmother’s house. It read, ‘Whoever

recites Shema Yisrael, Hashem, Who is the Creator of the world, will be protected.' The friend convinced not only my daughter to read this nightly before she went to sleep, but, all in all, girls from sixty families began doing this! Now, if you want to know who is my daughter's friend who catalyzed this whole revolution: Tonight's bride is the one!"