

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

When the Romans led Rabbi Akiva to his execution (for teaching Torah), it was his time to recite *Krias Shema*. They subjected him to inhumane torture by scraping off his skin with metal combs. Meanwhile, he was engaged in *Kabbolas Ol Malchus Shomayim*, accepting upon himself the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom. His students watched in horror as their revered, saintly *Rebbe* calmly focused on the spiritual sphere, while ignoring his physical pain. His students asked, "Must one go so far?" (Is it necessary to suffer so much in showing one's devotion to Hashem? How far should *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice go?) Rabbi Akiva replied, "All my days, I was concerned about the *pasuk* (*V'ahavta es Hashem Elokecha b'chol levavcha, u'b'chol nafshecha, u'b'chol me'odecha*), which calls for loving Hashem *b'chol nafshecha*, with all your soul/with all your entire being, which *Chazal* interpret, 'Even if He takes your *nefesh*, life.' How would I fulfill this imperative? Now that the opportunity to give up my life for Hashem has come my way, should I not fulfill the *mitzvah* to the best of my ability?" Rabbi Akiva prolonged his vocalizing of the word *Echad*, One (of the *Shema*), until his soul departed from him.

*Maharal* asks why Rabbi Akiva chose to leave this world with the word *Echad*, One, on his lips, if in fact, the *pasuk* that he was intending to fulfill was: Love Hashem with ... your entire being. Why does *Echad* eclipse *b'chol nafshecha*? He explains that the key to loving Hashem is our affirmation of the concept of *Echad*. When we declare *Echad*/Hashem's unity, we are proclaiming that nothing exists apart from Hashem. He is the only reality; thus, ultimately, everything returns to Him. The root of loving Hashem is our ability to cleave (*misdabeik*) to Him, to the point that we see ourselves connected to Him. Once we acknowledge Hashem's unity, we will, by extension, see ourselves as connected to Him. Our love of Him will be the consequence of this relationship.

Furthermore, the *gematria*, numerical equivalent, of *ahavah* is 13, the same as *echad*, 13. Recognizing the oneness, singularity of something, catalyzes our love for it.

Rabbi Akiva died upon reciting *echad*, since *echad* is the root of loving Hashem. *Kiddush Hashem*, relinquishing one's life to Hashem, is borne out of one's love for Hashem and an understanding that we are His and that everything ultimately returns to the Creator. The *Yerushalmi Brachos* 67B teaches that Rabbi Akiva was actually smiling during his ordeal. How is this possible? *Horav Tzvi Kushelevsky, Shlita*, quotes the *Maharam, zl, m'Rottenburg* who says that he had received a tradition that one who dies *al Kiddush Hashem* does not experience pain (*Teshuvos* 4:517). Rabbi Akiva smiled because he felt no pain. [It is entirely understandable that, at that epic moment, one is so connected to Hashem that his mind is elsewhere.]

The *Rosh Yeshiva* offers us practical advice concerning the *kavanah*, intention, that should course through our minds when we recite *Shema Yisrael*. We should picture ourselves being confronted with tests that demand our *mesiras nefesh*, such as being compelled to choose between bowing down to an idol, or suffering an excruciatingly painful death. By just imagining this, our love for Hashem will increase.

I would like to suggest an alternative approach to understanding how the *Echad* of *Shema Yisrael* attests to our love of Hashem. As Yaakov *Avinu* was about to descend to the spiritually/morally bankrupt land of Egypt, Hashem appeared to him and told him not to worry. He would descend with him to Egypt, and He would bring him out of Egypt. Hashem concludes his encouraging words, *V'Yosef yoshis yado al einecha*; "And Yosef will place his hand on your eyes" (*Bereishis* 46:4). Concerning this last statement, the *Zohar* comments, *Da raza d'Krias Shema*; "This is the secret of *Krias Shema*."

The *Kol Aryeh* (preface to *Meseches Chullin*) explains this *Zohar* based on a statement by *Chazal* (*Pesachim* 50A) that distinguishes between: the world in which our mortal vision is limited, thus restricting our ability to see beyond the external, superficial; and the World of Truth, where our spiritual vision allows us to see the absolute truth in all its reality. Thus, *Chazal* say: "In this world, when something (which we perceive as being) good happens, we recite the blessing *Hatov u'meitiv*, 'the One Who is good and does good.' When something (which we perceive as) bad occurs, we bless, *Baruch Dayan Ha'Emes*, 'Blessed is the True Judge.'" In the World of Truth, no distinction exists between "good" and "bad," because there we see and understand that we do not experience "bad," only "good."

The belief that Hashem does only good is essentially the motif of *Krias Shema*. We declare Hashem *Elokeinu*, Hashem (Who is) our G-d; Hashem *Echad*, Hashem is One. Hashem has Names which relate to His attributes. *Elokim/Elokeinu* is the Name associated with *Din*, Strict Justice. Hashem: *Yud, Kay, Vov, Kay* is the name attributed to Divine Mercy. The message of *Shema Yisrael* is: The G-d Whom we perceive as merciful and compassionate is *Echad*, One and the same. When we declare *Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad*, we affirm this idea.

The *Tur* rules that we universally cover our eyes when we recite *Shema Yisrael*, because, at times, when we try to reconcile mercy and justice coming from the same Source, we become bogged down with the many troubles, trials and tribulations that surround us. Thus, we cover our eyes as if to figuratively say: "We do not see the troubles. It is all good."

When Yaakov went down to Egypt, he was frightened about what would happen to his family. He saw the beginning of a long and bitter exile, enslavement and death. Hashem reminded him what had taken place concerning Yosef. Despite all the vicissitudes and trauma to which he was subjected, all had worked out for the best. "Cover your eyes and you will see the truth."

The greatest deterrent to loving Hashem comes from the *tzaros*, troubles, which either we personally experience or we observe the experiences of others. *Shema Yisrael*, with its message of unity, teaches us that it is all from one compassionate G-d. Thus, our belief in the unity of Hashem is the key to loving Him.