

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Va'etchanan

We are certainly all familiar with the Torah's most famous declaration of faith: the SH'MA which appears in this week's Parsha (6:4): "Hear O Israel, Gd is our Sovereign and He is the only Gd."

The statement of fact that "Gd is our Sovereign" expresses our unqualified acceptance of HaShem as our Master and Lawgiver, our King and Ruler whose laws and commands we are duty bound to implement. This obeisance is fundamental to any serious Jewish commitment and clearly justifies the SH'MA's religious acclaim.

However, what is not so obvious is our declaration that Gd is One, especially in today's world where, for the most part, idolatry is consigned to ancient cultic performances that have little attraction and relevance for modern man?

The Dubna Maggid offers a profound understanding of this Divine Oneness. We recite the SH'MA twice daily to remind us that whatever transpires in the course of the day and night is a function of the Almighty's Providence. This belief is hinted at by the prophet through whom Gd declares, "I am first and I am last, and beside Me, there is nothing" (Yishayahu 44:6), which the Maggid translated as: "Remember Me the first thing in the morning; remember Me at nighttime."

What this means is simply this: From what happens in the workplace to what takes place at home, it is all governed by HaShem. Precisely because there are no overt miracles and Gd chooses to hide His Presence from man behind the mysterious cloud (see Yishayahu 45:15), one might be tempted to attribute all events to chance and coincidence. The SH'MA proclaims, to the contrary, that Gd is in charge of it all, that there is but One Gd who is responsible for everything, that all of reality, all of existence as such is only possible within the divine enclosure. As the Rav put it: "One must become conscious of being an integral part of a great process through which the divine will is realized ..."

With this realization, one functions with an acute awareness that Gd is his intimate, his close friend who orchestrates all events in accordance with a grand plan, that while occluded from man's comprehension, is very much known to its divine Author. Of course, there are those events that man precipitates through his own actions and are known and thus clearly anticipated. Should a person ingest poison, he will have no problem understanding the consequences. However, when certain events occur which simply make no sense and cannot be attributed to any obvious cause, it takes the faith of the SH'MA to calmly accept the occurrence as an expression of Gd's will.

To give a rather pedestrian illustration: Here in Jerusalem, waiting for the right bus can be a frustrating experience. You arrive at the stop early enough to make the bus and promptly keep your appointment. And then the bus fails to arrive. You're furious and intend to give the driver a piece of your mind, even as you know he's probably not at fault. Or, you arrive at the bus stop a moment too late, just in time to watch the bus leaving and know it will be another 20 minutes wait before the next one comes. However, with a SH'MA attitude, you'd learn to respond the way Reb Yitzchak Dovid Gutfarb zt'l of Yerushalayim did when he said, "I never missed a bus, though sometimes I came early for the next bus." For if it was destined for him to take the next bus; he didn't miss the bus that was meant for him.

The point should be clear. It's often the "pebble events" in our lives, those small mundane frustrations that, much like the pebbles in our shoes, can drive us crazy with their annoyances and ruin an otherwise good day. But when we cultivate the SH'MA awareness of Yichud HaShem, the mysterious Oneness of Gd, anger subsides, worries vanish and fear abates. The upbeat mood is protected, our outlook is brighter and our ability to focus and achieve is enhanced and magnified.

True, the mitzva is to recite the SH'MA only twice a day, but its awareness should be constant. How can this be accomplished?

The Chidushei HaRim writes that Chasidim know a lot of concepts but knowing alone is insufficient. These great and sublime religious principles must be reviewed constantly. "One must repeat ten times, twenty times... a thousand times, until he knows there's no one other than HaShem." The Chidushei HaRim quotes the following Zohar: "The Jewish nation... didn't know anything about belief in Hakadosh Baruch Hu, because in Egypt they worshiped idols. They forgot the fundamentals of faith which they used to know, which... they inherited from their father, Yaakov. Moshe taught and reminded them that there is a G-d. After the nation witnessed the miracles of the plagues and at the Sea and after experiencing the miracles of the manna and of Miriam's well and after receiving the Torah, ... then Moshe told them, 'Up until now, I taught you faith as one teaches a child... I taught you what to know and how to think, to know that HaShem is G-d. Perhaps you will say that it is a simple matter. Behold, it states, 'You shall know today and review it in your heart that HaShem is Elokim in heaven above and on the earth below there is none other' " (4:39).

Ingraining the SH'MA principle within our very consciousness requires effort and concentration. The results, however, of such an embedding can be transformative. HaShem becomes your ever-present companion and you become a walking Kiddush HaShem.