

VAESCHANAN (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11)

Why are we Whispering? What's the Big Secret?

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

One of the first prayers a Jewish child learns is the “Shema”. His mother and/or father hold him at bedtime and sing to him the holy words that a Jew recites every morning and every evening:

“Shema Yisrael ... – Listen Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One.

“Boruch Shaim ... – Blessed is the Name of His Glorious kingdom forever and ever.

“V’ahavta ... – You will love the Lord your G-d with all your heart, with all your soul, and all your possessions . . .” (Deuteronomy, 6:4-10)

This prayer is the vehicle of “Acceptance of the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.” By reciting this ancient sacred formula, a Jew declares himself to be the absolute servant of the absolute King of Kings. It is one of the first things we say in the morning and one of the last things we say at night. A sick person on his deathbed recites it, and it has been the final statement of untold Jewish martyrs throughout history.

Interestingly, it seems that an “intruder” has found its way into this sublime declaration. The entire text cited above comes from this week’s Torah Portion. The Book of Deuteronomy is Moses’ “good-bye” speech to his beloved nation. Moses is telling Israel that there is one G-d. He tells us to love G-d, etc. However, the second sentence, *“Boruch Shaim . . . -- Blessed is the Name of His Glorious kingdom forever and ever,”* is not from the Torah. In fact, when we recite the *Shema*, these words are recited in an undertone.

Where does this phrase come from? What is it doing in the *Shema*, and why are we whispering?

Jacob was lying on his deathbed. His twelve sons stood by his bedside, awaiting his blessing. He was concerned. “How do I know,” he asked, “that you will continue to worship the One G-d after I’m gone? How do I know you will not become idol worshippers?”

The twelve sons of Israel/Jacob responded in unison, *“Shema Yisrael – Listen Israel. Listen to our commitment, Father Israel*, the Lord is our G-d –* **your** G-d is **our** G-d; the Lord is One.”*

Relieved and reassured that his sons would continue on the path blazed by his father and grandfather, Israel responded, *“Boruch Shaim . . . – Blessed is the Name of His Glorious kingdom for ever.”*

The *Mishna Brurah* (61:30) tells us that our Sages were faced with a dilemma: To say, or not to say; that was the question! To skip these words seems inappropriate because Jacob said them. To say these words seems equally inappropriate because Moses did NOT include them in the Torah. Therefore, as a bit of a compromise, we include the phrase, but we do so silently, to distinguish it from the words that are Biblical.

(There is, however, an exception. On Yom Kippur, we say it out loud. Several of our prayers are modeled after the songs of praise uttered by the angels in Heaven. Moses heard these words recited by the angels, and taught them to the Nation of Israel. On Yom Kippur, “*Boruch Shaim . . .*” is recited out loud, along with the rest of the *Shema*. The reason is that on Yom Kippur, we are considered to have attained the level of angels. That is one of the reasons for the fast. Angels do not need to eat, and on this holiest day of the year, neither do we. Just as Moses heard the angels say, “*Boruch Shaim . . .*” in a loud voice, so do we.)

WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?! Why so much focus on an additional line in the *Shema*? Why is it so important for us to repeat Jacob’s prayer? The *Shema* is considered our statement of acceptance of G-d’s kingdom. Isn’t that enough?

No. It is not enough that WE are dedicated to G-d. We must pass this dedication along to our children. The fact that Jacob had committed his life to G-d wasn’t sufficient. Abraham taught the world about G-d. Only one of his nine children, Isaac, followed in his ways. Only one of Isaac’s two children, Jacob, picked up the torch and ran with it. Who was going to take Jacob’s Torah and pass it on to the next generation?

All twelve of Jacob’s sons responded: “We will! *Shema Yisrael!* Listen to us, Dad! We will carry on your traditions! We accept your G-d as our G-d, and we promise to teach our children as well.”

With that assurance, Jacob could die in peace.

This Shabbos is called “*Shabbos ‘Nachamu.’*” It gets its name from the opening words of this week’s *Haftara*, Reading from the Prophets. The Prophet Isaiah tells the People, “‘*Nachamu, Nachamu, ami – Be comforted, be comforted, My Nation,*’ says G-d.” (Isaiah, 40:1) On the Shabbos following Tisha B’Av, the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, G-d reminds us to take heart. As difficult and painful as our history has been, G-d consoles us with the promise of a brighter Tomorrow.

Why did Moses not write “*Boruch Shaim... – Blessed is the Name of His Glorious kingdom forever and ever*” in his sermon to the People of Israel? After all, as I mentioned above, he knew the prayer. He learned it from the angels and he taught it to the People. Why didn’t he include it in his parting words to the Nation?

I would like to suggest an answer. Moses was cautioning the people to continue to follow G-d’s ways. He was not optimistic. He knew that they would eventually stumble. He warned them not to sin; yet he knew that they would. He was apprehensive; he was nervous. He needed reassurance that the People of Israel would follow G-d’s Torah “*forever and ever.*” He didn’t hear that reassurance from his People.

We are living in painful times. Our people are being spiritually undermined from within, and physically attacked from without. Torah study is on the rise in some circles, but Torah life is being abandoned in others. Our enemies seek to destroy us in Israel, Europe, and our own back yard. Is there a future for our People?

Isaiah tells us, in G-d’s Name, “*Be comforted. There is a bright and peaceful future ahead. There will be a wonderful Tomorrow. There is a future time when Israel will dwell in peace and tranquility, with devotion to G-d and His Torah.*”

In this regard, Isaiah was, perhaps, receiving a more positive prophecy than Moses was. Moses was worried. Isaiah was reassured.

“*Boruch Shaim... – Blessed is the Name of His Glorious kingdom forever and ever.*” Forever is a very long time. There WILL, G-d willing, be a brighter Tomorrow.

May that Tomorrow be today.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz