

Unit 4 – Mitzvah Section

Lesson 16 - שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד

Background:

This pasuk is a good opportunity to explain the meanings and uses of God's names. Since we don't want to keep pronouncing God's name in this discussion, it's important to talk about pronunciation first. God is most often represented by the letters Yod Heh Vav Heh. We don't know exactly how this name used to be pronounced, but after the destruction of the first Bet haMikdash, Jews stopped pronouncing this name and said Adonai instead. Since we want to avoid even pronouncing Adonai outside the context of a pasuk, whenever we say "Hashem" we mean Yod Heh Vav Heh as opposed to Elohim.

Activity:

Explain that right after the Ten Commandments comes a narrative section about awesomeness of מַעֲמַד הַר סִינַי from 5:19 until the end of the perek. The rest of Moshe's second speech will be an extended explication of each of the Ten Commandments. The Shema pasuk is a restatement of the First Commandment.

This lesson will consist of a discussion about meaning of the Shema pasuk starting with each element and them putting them together to form one idea.

Ask: *What is the difference between the word Hashem and Elokenu. Are they exact synonyms, if so why do we need two names for God?*

For the meaning of YHVH ask students to look Shemot 3:13-15:

(יג) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָאֱלֹהִים הַזֶּה אֲנִי כִּי בָא אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתִּי לָהֶם אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם וְאָמְרוּ לִי מַה שְּׁמוֹ מָה אֶמַר אֲלֵהֶם:
(יד) וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם:
(טו) וַיֹּאמֶר עוֹד אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כֹּה תֹאמַר אֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְדֹד אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם זֶה שְׁמִי לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זְכוּרִי לְדֹר וָדֹר:

When Moshe asks for God's name to tell Bnei Yisrael, God answers "I will be what I will be...I will be send me to you." In the very next pasuk the same idea is repeated but now God says "YHVH...sent me to you this is my name forever." Hashem is God's personal name; it is a proper noun. Pasuk 14 shows us that the etymology of God's personal name is from the root הוה, "to be." God's personal name can roughly be translates as "Being" or "Existence."

For the meaning of Elohim ask students to look up Debarim 5:6:

אֲנִי כִּי יְדֹד אֱלֹהֵיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים לֹא יִהְיֶה לְךָ אֱלֹהִים אַחֵרִים עַל פְּנֵי:
Elohim just means gods (El is the singular form) and can refer to Hashem as in "I am Hashem your God" or to false gods – אלהים אחרים. This is not God's name but simply a common noun that has the same meaning as god in English or Allah in Arabic. (For an explanation of why the plural is used to refer to Hashem see Encyclopedia Judaica, s.v. "God, names of.")

Ask: *What does ידוד אלהינו usually mean?*

Hashem Elokenu usually means: Hashem, our God. It is a noun with an appositive like “Joe, our class president.” This is what this phrase means most of the time in Tanakh, for example **יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד** (Dt 5:2,20,23).

Ask: *Does this meaning fit into the Shemah pasuk? Why is it problematic?*

No. It would be difficult to understand it this way because the pasuk then repeats **יהוה** which would be superfluous. “Hear oh Israel, Hashem, who is our God, Hashem is one.” It would have been better to leave out the second Hashem.

Ask: *Can you think of another interpretation?*

יהוה אלהינו is a complete sentence (missing a verb which is allowed in Hebrew) meaning YHVH is our God. This meaning is also used in **דברי הימים ב' יג'**.

Ask: *What does the second half of the sentence teach?*

יהוה אחד is a second sentence that can be translated as:

- a. YHVH is one (a unity). This interpretation as a philosophical statement was used by the medieval Jewish philosophers like Rambam.
- b. YHVH alone. While the first half says YHVH is our God it still leaves open the possibility that we believe in other gods also. Therefore the second half says that YHVH alone is our God. (Rashbam)

We have now introduced students to the two most common referents to God. They should keep in mind their meanings whenever reading Tanakh or Tefilah. We have given a solid understanding of one of the most important pesukim in the Torah. Whenever we pray we should have the *kavvanah* that YHVH (God’s personal name) is our God and YHVH is also a unity and is the only God.

However, we need to go one step further. Students can go through high school, learn about a multitude of ideas and halakhot, but still not give adequate thought to the most fundamental questions that form the basis of Judaism. Students may be afraid to ask questions about God. However, if they cannot articulate the content and reason for their belief, then there is little chance that such belief will remain meaningful to them later on. The Rambam argues that many people who say they believe in God actually don’t because they cannot define what they believe in or have a false conception of what God means.

Ask: *Why is this pasuk so important? Why have the Rabbis taught us to cover our eyes for special concentration only for this pasuk and no other part of the prayers? Why is this pasuk recited by martyrs before their deaths? What is the significance of the belief in only one God?* (Students will probably also ask the more difficult question, “How do we know God exist?” However, we should explain to them that this is not a meaningful question until one defines what the word “God” means. That definition can go a long way to help answer the question of existence.)

The following conceptions of God are all found within the Jewish tradition:

1. The first hint about God’s nature comes in Beresheet that man is created in God’s image. Of course, when we say that man is created in the image of God this does not mean a physical image. God, as opposed to what movies show us, is not a

- man with a white beard and deep voice. Any attempts to ascribe human qualities to the Infinite should be eschewed as shallow and appropriate only for small children. Instead, Rambam, with Aristotle, finds the common denominator between God and man in knowledge. God is pure Intellect, the repository and source of all true ideas, thought thinking about itself.
2. As seen above implied by God's name, Hashem means existence. When we first think of existence we at first only think of physical objects which we can see and feel. However, there are many things we believe to exist that are not physical such as love, emotions, energy, ideas, ethical values... These don't exist in any place or time but are still very real to us. When we think of our own existence and or everything in the world around us, we have an intuitive sense that there is some meaning behind the madness of evolution. The terms "Supreme Being," "Creator," or Rambam's "First Principle" all relate to God as the source or force behind all existence.
 3. God is also called הרחמן or רחמנא meaning "Merciful One." The English word "God" also probably comes from the same root as the word "good." The Rabbis teach us to imitate God's character traits, "Just as He is Merciful and Giving, so to you should be merciful and giving" (Mekhilta Beshalah, 3, זה א-לי). Where does our sense of right and wrong come from? Is it all subjective like our favorite ice-cream flavors? Most of us believe in goodness as an absolute moral value. That belief calls for a belief in God as the source of ethics and as the definition of goodness. In the words of Dostoyevsky, "If God does not exist, everything is permissible." (According to this definition, modern Americans and Europeans who think they are atheists but who believe in goodness actually do believe in God, they just don't know it!)
 4. When we pray to God using the terms אבינו – "Our Father," or מלכנו – "Our King" we express our belief in a personal God who thinks about us, cares for our needs, responds to our prayers, and commands us to act with devotion and righteousness. אב implies an intimate one-on-one loving relationship while מלך connotes a more impersonal awe-inspiring Commander. Blessings contain both aspects: The first half, "Blessed are You our God," uses the second person as if God stands right before us. The second half, "King of the universe, who..." switches to third person as if God is high above.

To get a better perspective of how Bnei Yisrael would have understood this pasuk when they heard it, we must look at their contextual background. During those times, all near Eastern people believed in polytheism – the existence of many gods who procreate, fight, eat sacrifices given to them by humans... Polytheism is inconsistent with all of the above conceptions of God. 1. They thought only kings were gods - that's what gave kings their authority - but nobody else. The Torah teaches that all people are created in God's image and therefore all equal. 2. They thought that older gods give birth to younger gods. That means that gods do not have necessary existence and so cannot be the force behind creation itself. 3. Their gods fight about what is right and wrong. If I do an action that is good for one god it can be bad for another one. There is no absolute morals in polytheism (or in atheism, for that matter). Only belief in one God can guarantee a stable standard of ethics. 4. Their gods did not care too much about humans. They were interested in

competing with other gods. They only were nice to humans who fed them sacrifices. Belief in one God who is unconditionally concerned about all creations in the world, like a father to his children, replaced those ancient fetishes.

Therefore, when we say Shema, we are at the same time affirming our belief in an entire set of values including equality of all people, a sense of order in the cosmos, absolute goodness, and a meaningful human existence. At the same time, we reject magical superstition, disorder, evil, and racism. Of course, God transcends the definitions given here. Students in the class may want to express other ways of relating to God and they should be encouraged to continue thinking about these ideas and feel free to discuss them with the class.