

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XI: Vayigash (Gen. 44:18–47:27)

Essay 10. Why would Jacob say the *Shema Yisrael* prayer upon meeting Joseph?

פסוק "וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהֵי נִיפֹל עַל-צַנְאָרְיוֹ" פִּירָשׁ רַש"י, אָבֵל יַעֲקֹב לֹא נָפַל עַל צַנְאָר יוֹסֵף וְלֹא נִשְׁקָו לְפִי שֶׁהִנֵּה קוֹרֵא אֶת שְׁמֵעַ. מִקְשִׁים הָעוֹלָם לְמָה דִּנְקָא קָרָא יַעֲקֹב אֶת שְׁמֵעַ בְּעֵת הַהִיא שֶׁהִנֵּה יוֹדֵעַ שְׂיוֹסֵף בָּא אֵלָיו. וְאֵי תִימָא שָׂאזְ דִּנְקָא בְּאוֹתוֹ הָעֵת הִנֵּה הִזְמִן לְקָרוֹת פְּנִיתִין, קִשָּׁה עַל יוֹסֵף לְמָה לֹא קָרָאוּ אִף הוּא בְּעֵת הַהִיא.

There is a **verse**: “Joseph ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to meet his father Israel; he presented himself to him and, fell upon his neck, he wept on his neck a good while.” **Rashi explained: “But Jacob did not fall on Joseph's neck and did not kiss him, as he was saying the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, “Hear, O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One” (Deut. 6:4).¹ The world asks why Jacob said the *Shema* precisely at this time, for he knew that Joseph was coming to him. Some say that this was exactly the time to say it according to the pious ones, who conclude the reading of the *Shema* with sunrise,² but this creates a difficulty as to Joseph as to why his reading wasn't also at the same time.**

וְעוֹד קִשָּׁה דְּמִפְשֻׁט הַפְּתִיב בְּרָאָה שֶׁיַּעֲקֹב רָאָה אֶת יוֹסֵף, דְּמִדְּכָתִיב "וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהֵי" מִשְׁמַע שֶׁיַּעֲקֹב רָאָה אוֹתוֹ, דָּאֵי לֹא הָכִי לֹא אֲתֵי שְׁפִיר הַלְּשׁוֹן שֶׁל "וַיִּרְא אֱלֹהֵי", וְאִם כֵּן עַל פְּרָחָה לֹמֵר שְׁמִיד שֶׁיַּעֲקֹב רָאָה אוֹתוֹ הַתְּחִיל לְקָרוֹת אֶת שְׁמֵעַ, וְזֶה תִימָא [ה]. וְגַם אֵין לֹמֵר שֶׁיַּעֲקֹב נִשָּׂא עֵינָיו וְרָאָה אוֹתוֹ בְּאַמְצַע הַקְּרִיאַת שְׁמֵעַ, שֶׁהָרִי סוּד הַקְּרִיאַת שְׁמֵעַ הוּא בְּסִגְרוֹ דְּעֵינָיו.

Another difficulty is that from the plain meaning of the Scripture it appears that Jacob saw Joseph, as from the Writing, “and he presented himself,” the meaning is that Jacob saw him. For if not, the language of “and he presented himself” is not appropriate, and if so, you must say that as soon as Jacob saw him, he started saying the Shema, and this is a wonder. We also can't say that Jacob lifted his eyes and saw him in the middle of reading the *Shema*, for the secret of reading the *Shema* is the closure of our eyes when we read it.³

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¹ The complete prayer is Deut. 6:4–9, 11:13–21, and Num. 15:37–41. This essay focuses on the first sentence, Deut. 6:4.

² Berachot 9b.

³ Berachot 13b: Rabbi Yehuda ha'Nasi would pass his hand over his face while reciting the first verse. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 61:5: “They are accustomed to place their hands on their faces during the reading of the first verse in order that one will not look at anything that will restrain him from directing [his attention to the reading].”

What the Kabbalists wrote will be understood, that the letters of the first and last words of the first verse, *Shema* (שְׁמַע) (hear) and *Echad* (אֶחָד) (one) are six letters, with the last letter of Shema and the last letter of Echad written enlarged in the Torah scrolls, so that the four remaining normal-sized letters **comprise the letters** of the word *esmach* (אֶשְׁמַח) (“I will be happy”). That is, it is written in the Zohar III:236b:

Rabbi Shimon began [by saying]: “Hear, O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, the L-rd is One.” The letter *ayin* is [written] large [in the Torah scroll], and the letter *dalet* as well. Their sign is *ed* (עַד) (witness). This is what is written, “The L-rd is a witness against you” (I Sam. 12:5). . . .

“We found in the book of Rabbi Menona Saba, everyone who engages in the unification each day [by reciting the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, which affirms G-d’s unity], a joy invites from above, from the secret of these letters – the *shin* and *mem* on the one hand, the *alef* and *chet* on the other. . . . Their sign is *esmach* (אֶשְׁמַח) (“I will be happy”), as it is said, “I will rejoice in the L-rd” (Ps. 104:34). Literally. This is the unification of the Holy One. This is a beautiful thing. So it is in the book of Enoch, who said the same thing, that he who engages in the unification each day invites joy from above.”

- Zohar III:236b

וְד' רַבְתִּי רוֹמְזוֹ לְאַרְבָּעָה אִמָּהוֹת וְעִי"ן רַבְתִּי דְּמִשְׁמַע רוֹמְזוֹ לְשְׁלוֹשָׁה אָבוֹת, אַבְרָהָם חֶסֶד, ע' גְּשָׁרִים שֶׁל חֶסֶד, יִצְחָק דִּין, ע' סְנֵהֲדָרִין וְהֵם סוּד הַע' זְמָנִים, יַעֲקֹב ע' נֶפֶשׁ יוֹצְאֵי יְרִיכּוֹ עַכ"ל. וְעַד אוֹתָהּ שְׁעָה לֹא רָאָה יַעֲקֹב ע' נֶפֶשׁ כָּלָם בְּיַחַד, וּמַעֲתָה שָׁבָא יוֹסֵף אֶצְלוֹ גְּתִיחַדוֹ כָּל הַשְּׁבָעִים וְלָכֵן מִיָּד כְּשֶׁרָאָה אֶת יוֹסֵף כְּדֹכְתִּיב "וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו", הִתְחִיל לִקְרוֹת אֶת שְׁמַע כְּדִי לְהַשְׁלִים הַתִּיקוֹן וְהִיחֹד שְׁמוּשָׁל עָלָיו כְּעִי"ן שֶׁל שְׁמַע.

The *dalet*, with a Gematria of four, **is written large to hint at the four mothers**, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, **and the *ayin*, with a Gematria of seventy, is written large for a meaning hinting at the three fathers: Abraham**, who in Kabbalah **is associated with the attribute of kindness (*chessed*)**,⁴ and there are **seventy gates of kindness**;⁵ **Isaac is associated with the attribute of judgment**,⁶ and **seventy is also associated with the Sanhedrin and they were a council of seventy elders**; and **Jacob is known for seventy descendants**.⁷ **Until that moment, Jacob had not seen all seventy of those souls together, but now that Joseph came to him, all of the seventy were secluded together, and therefore immediately upon seeing Joseph, as it is**

⁴ Zohar Chadash, Chukat 62b: “On three things the world stands: on the Torah—this is Jacob, on the service [of G-d]—this is the oral Torah, and on doing acts of kindness—this is Abraham.”

⁵ The translator has not identified a source for there being 70 gates of kindness.

⁶ Zohar I:23b notes that Isaac’s name, יִצְחָק, can be rearranged as חֵי קֵץ, meaning “an end to life.”

⁷ Ex. 1:5: “The total number of persons that were descendants of Jacob came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.”

written, “he presented himself to him,” he began to read the *Shema* in order to complete the repair the damage caused by the breaking of the Vessels **and the unification that was imposed upon him by the *ayin* of the *Shema***. That is, the Kabbalistic view is that man’s purpose is to tie together the spiritual and physical realities as one, thus repairing the original harmony that was destroyed with the breaking of the Vessels, prior to the creation of the universe. This can be achieved by restoring the connection between the intellectual and emotional parts of G-d’s names. A number of prayers serve as unifications to effect such a repair, when recited with the proper Kabbalistic intent. The most famous unification is the first sentence of the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, which when recited with the proper intent creates the unification of two names of G-d, viz, the four-lettered name and Elokim.

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