HALACHIC AND HASHKAFIC ISSUES IN
CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

203 - EMUNA & BELIEF - PART 2
OU ISRAEL CENTER - WINTER 2020/21

In Part 1 we saw that the first, and most basic, mitzva of the 613 is ‘Anochi Hashem Elokecha’. According to most mefarshim, this is the mitzva of Emuna. The Rambam and other Rishonim understood that this mitzva includes a requirement to try as much as we can to understand God, including where possible the rational and logical proofs for His existence. We saw others who questioned the efficacy of this approach and stressed the need to connect with God not only intellectually but also psychologically and emotionally.

In this shiur we will examine the next fundamental mitzva - Shema Yisrael - which focuses on the Oneness of God and, as we shall see, our inability to actually define Him at all!

A] HASHEM ECHAD: THE SECOND MITZVA

The expression ‘Shema Yisrael’ appears 4 times in Tanach - all in Sefer Devarim. The most famous is the mitzva on every Jew to understand - shema - that God is One.

In Sefer Hamitzvot, the Rambam stresses that this principle of Yichud is the reason why we were brought out of Egypt. This is also identical with the concept of accepting God as a King - Ol Malchut Shamayim. Ultimately, it is focused on our awareness that there is a purpose and meaning to existence and ONE unified reality with God at its center.

B] RECITING THE SHEMA: IN HALACHA AND MINHAG

The custom is to write the ayin and dalet in large letters to spell ‘eid’ - the Shema is a testimony to our Emuna.

Chazal bring a halacha to elongate the dalet of Echad for the length of time that it takes to acknowledge in one’s mind that God is One in all of existence.

1. Note that, even though R. Menachem Kasher did not finish his magnum opus Torah Sheleima on all of Chumash (he only reached the middle of Bamidbar), he DID produce a full sefer - Shema Yisrael (1979) - which is effectively Torah Sheleima on the first paragraph of Shema. There are 80 pages and over 200 entries just for the first verse!!

2. In fact, due to the way that most Ashkenazim and Sefardim now pronounce the dalet, this is impossible! In Mishnaic and Talmudic times, there was a clear distinction between dalet with a dagesh kal and without a dagesh kal, paralleling tav vs. sav or bet vs. vet. With a dagesh, it is a plosive, and is pronounced just as we pronounce a dalet. Without a dagesh, it is a fricative, and is pronounced like the ‘th’ in the word ‘either’. It is thus possible to extend the dalet. Nowadays, in order to fulfill this Talmudic instruction, we could pronounce our dalets in the first verse of Shema as fricative. Otherwise, we can simply assert that it is no longer possible to fulfill this Talmudic instruction, and not attempt it. Extending the ‘ahhh’ or the chet does not achieve the goal of this halacha. Similarly, trying to extend a plosive dalet is impossible, and people just end up saying a harsh ‘diidiid’ sound at the end of the word. The Magen Avraham is clear that one should not make it into a dagesh chazak (strong dagesh, which effectively doubles the pronunciation of the letter). See http://dafyummy.blogspot.com/2012/08/berachot-13b-extending-daled-in-echad.html and also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dagesh.
The Shulchan Aruch brings specific halachot and also minhagim on how to say the verse of Shema. These include how to pronounce the chet and the dalet. There is also a minhag to roll the head in all directions as one says Shema.

The Mishna Berura notes a concern that the movement of the head should not look like the sign of the cross!

In fact there was a real concern with this since the Christians saw the verse of Shema Yisrael as a proof for the Trinity!

There are clearly anti-trinitarian statements in the Midrash.

C] YICHUD HASHEM: THE SECOND IKAR

The Rambam, in his introduction to Perek Chelek, explains the basic parameters of this Ikar - God’s Unity is unlike all others. Other units can be broken down into smaller parts or are one out of a number of units. God’s Unity is indivisible and all-encompassing. Clearly, this Ikar goes much deeper than a simple rejection of idolatry.  

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The Rambam states that God’s Unity is a natural corollary to his Infinity. Anything which is one of a number of items is by definition limited. Understanding God’s Unity is a positive mitzva and denying it is the breach of a negative mitzva.

**D] YICHUD HASHEM AS ONE OF THE 6 CONSTANT MITZVOT**

"The Mitzvah of Yichud is one of the 6 ‘Constant Mitzvot’ which every Jew must fulfil at all times."  

**E] IMPLICATIONS OF GOD’S ONENESS**

**E1] THE UNFATHOMABLE NATURE OF GOD**

In Yigdal, the poet stresses that God’s unity is infinite and, consequently, He remains ne’elam.

- Ne’elam is translated by different siddurim as ‘inscrutable’, ‘unfathomable’, ‘unimaginable’ and ‘invisible’.
- God’s ‘invisibility’ is a consequence of His all-pervasive reality. God is not ‘locatable’ within space or time?

Chazal explain why God is called ‘HaMakom’ - the Place. The universe is located ‘within Him’ and not He within it.

- Spirituality is often compared to ‘ruach’ - wind. We do not sense the air around us since it is all encompassing. But when it moves, we can be blown away by the weight of it!

**E2] A REFUTATION OF DUALISM**

Given that everything comes from God, this affects the way that we perceive evil, struggle and challenges in life. We DO NOT believe in a ‘Dark Side’.

- Similarly, in Torah thought the Satan and the yetzer hara as simply melachim - messengers of God.
E3] THE OMNISIGNIFICANCE OF OUR LIVES

• Since everything in this world derives from One Source, this must affect the way we view parts of life which many would regard as ‘religiously neutral’ - eg sleep, work, commuting. With the right kavanot, all of these activities can be dedicated to or preparation for connection to God. This is one of the reasons why we repeat the Shema before we go to sleep. In that way, sleep is not simply rest after a hard day, but essential preparation for the next day of Torah and mitzvot.

E4] PURPOSE AND MEANING IN LIFE

• Yichud Hashem is expressed to be the reason why we were brought out of Egypt. This concept gives meaning and purpose to our lives. Yetzat Mitzrayim was not simply ‘freedom from’ (let My people go) but ‘freedom to’ (let My people go SO THAT they can serve Me). The Jewish perspective on freedom is always purpose led - from avadim of Paro to avadim of God. Freedom to be wild and care-free is highly destructive.6

F] YICHUD HASHEM AND ‘NEGATIVE THEOLOGY’

• Given that God has an absolute Unity, how can we positively describe Him? If we say ‘God is great’, does that imply two aspects of God: (i) Him and (ii) how He is.

• Are we even able to make any statement which defines God in any way? Such definition would seem only to limit God and to ‘compartmentalize’7 His being.

Rabbi Chanina here expresses grave concerns at using ANY expression to describe God other than those which were revealed to us through nevua BY God. ‘איה-ל הגרדול הגרדול והגרדול is given to us in Chumash, through the nevua of Moshe. It was also fixed into our tefilla by the Anshei Knesset HaGedola, which included nevi’im.

• It is not possible for us to truly understand anything positive about God - ‘He is X’. All we can do is describe God in the negative - ‘We don’t know what He IS but we know that He is NOT X’. Note that the concept of ‘infinite’ is also a negative - INfinite - 8

17. ..... Know that the negative attributes of God are the true attributes: they do not include any incorrect notions or any deficiency whatever in reference to God, while positive attributes imply polytheism, and are inadequate ......

.... I would observe that, as has already been shown, God’s existence is absolute, that it includes no composition, as will be proved, and that we comprehend only the fact that He exists, not His essence. Consequently it is false to hold that He has any positive attribute: for He does not possess existence in addition to His essence: it therefore cannot be said that the one may be described as an attribute [of the other]; much less has He in addition to His existence] a compound essence, consisting of two constituent elements to which the attribute could refer. Still less has He accidents, which could be described by an attribute. Hence it is clear that He has no positive attribute whatever.

6. Note that the Greek names for the 5 books of the Chumash were taken from the Rabbinic names - Genesis = Sefer HaYetzira, Leviticus = Torat Cohanim, Numbers = Sefer HaPekudim, Deuteronomy = Mishne Torah. But Exodus is a mistranslation of Sefer HaGesula. For the Jews, the focus was redemption through Torah. For the non-Jews, the focus was escape from slavery. Rabbi Sacks zt’l also points out that the English and America revolutions were religiously motivated as ‘freedom to’, but the French and Russian were secularly motivated as ‘freedom from’. The former led successfully to a freer society, while the latter led to the reins of terror.

7. It becomes clear from this why most poskim regard Trinitarian Christianity as idolatrous. Aside from the corporealization of God as man (which is heretical under the Third Ikar) it also divides God into different attributes, in breach of Yichud Hashem.

8. On the subject of the Rambam’s negative theology see the following article - www.hashkafacircle.com/journal/R1_RT_Neg.pdf and also audio shiurim at www.hashkafacircle.com/shiurim/category/moreh-nevuchim/
The negative attributes, however, are those which are necessary to direct the mind to the truths which we must believe concerning God; for, on the one hand, they do not imply any plurality, and, on the other, they convey to man the highest possible knowledge of God.... when we say of this being, that it exists, we mean that its non-existence is impossible. We... therefore say that it is living, expressing thereby that it is not dead. We call such a being incorporeal, because we notice that it is unlike the heavens, which are living, but material. Seeing that it is also different from the intellect, which, though incorporeal and living, owes its existence to some cause, we say it is the first, expressing thereby that its existence is not due to any cause. ....

It has thus been shown that every attribute predicated of God either denotes the quality of an action, or, when the attribute is intended to convey some idea of the Divine Being itself, and not of His actions, the negation of the opposite. ....

What, then, can be the result of our efforts, when we try to obtain a knowledge of a Being that is free from substance, that is most simple, whose existence is absolute, and not due to any cause, to whose perfect essence nothing can be superadded, and whose perfection consists, as we have shown, in the absence of all defects..... In the contemplation of His essence, our comprehension and knowledge prove insufficient; in the examination of His works, how they necessarily result from His will, our knowledge proves to be ignorance, and in the endeavor to extol Him in words, all our efforts in speech are mere weakness and failure!

Moreh Nevuchim 1:58

• As such, our excitement after the First Ikar is short lived! The mitzva of ‘Anochi’ - to develop knowledge of God through intellectual thought - appears to be doomed to failure, since we cannot actually define any element of God!
• The answer, as we will now see, lies in the 3rd Ikar - that we did not perceive any physicality in God at Sinai.

G] THE THIRD IKAR - GOD’S INCORPOREALITY

The third principle: that He has no physicality. This means that the ‘Oneness’ [in Ikar 2] is not physical and has no physical strength, and is not affected by physical qualities, such as rest or movement, neither in essence nor incidentally. Therefore the Rabbis negated in relation to Him any connectedness or separateness .... The prophet said (Isaiah 40:18) ‘To whom could you compare God?’ .....For if He were physical then He would be like any other physical body. All that is written in the holy books regarding physical descriptions of God, such as walking, standing, sitting, speaking etc is allegorical. Thus the Rabbis said, "The Torah spoke in human language"; people have already spoken at length on this issue. This is the third principle and is attested to by the verse, "For you saw no image" (Devarim 4:15) i.e. you did not comprehend Him as a Being with an image for, as we have mentioned, he is not physical nor has physical strength.

H] WHAT DID THEY ‘SEE’ AT SINAI?

H1] THE PEOPLE

The people experienced God at Sinai through smoke, fog and fire. There was no vision of an image, just a terrifying and undeniable realization of God’s immanent presence.
H2] THE COHANIM AND THE ELDERS

74 of the people had a much more direct revelation. Moshe, Aharon, Nadav, Avihu and the 70 elders saw the pure sapphire blue paving under God’s throne.

H3] MOSHE

Moshe had the most intense vision of God at the top of the mountain. He perceived the ‘back’ of God but not his face.

Moshe requested from God at Sinai that He show him His ‘Kavod’. The Rambam explains that Moshe was seeking an understanding of God in a specific sense which would enable him to see God as a separate entity. He was granted a limited experience, being able to see God ‘from behind’ - i.e. somewhat distinguishable but not clear.

23. THE wisest man, our Teacher Moses, asked two things of God, and received a reply respecting both. The one thing he asked was, that God should let him know His true essence. The other, which in fact he asked first, that God should let him know His attributes. In answer to both these petitions God promised that He would let him know all His attributes, and that these were nothing but His actions. He also told him that His true essence could not be perceived, and pointed out a method by which he could obtain the utmost knowledge of God possible for man to acquire ….

Consequently the knowledge of the works of God is the knowledge of His attributes, by which He can be known. The fact that God promised Moses to give him a knowledge of His works, may be inferred from the circumstance that God taught him such attributes as refer exclusively to His works, viz., “merciful and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in goodness,” etc. (Ex 34:6). It is therefore clear that the ways which Moses wished to know, and which God taught him, are the actions emanating from God. Our Sages call them middot (qualities), and speak of the thirteen middot of God (Rosh Hashanah 17b)

9. Note the relevance of blue as the symbol of infinity and spirituality - techelet/sea/sky etc.
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They do not mean to say that God really possesses *middot*, but that He performs actions similar to such of our actions as originate in certain qualities, i.e., in certain psychical dispositions not that God has really such dispositions. 

Whenever any one of His actions is perceived by us, we ascribe to God that emotion which is the source of the act when performed by ourselves, and call Him by an epithet which is formed from the verb expressing that emotion. We see, e.g., how well He provides for the life of the embryo of living beings. Similar acts, when performed by us, are due to a certain emotion and tenderness called mercy and pity. God is, therefore, said to be merciful. Such instances do not imply that God is influenced by a feeling of mercy, but that acts similar to those which a father performs for his son, out of pity, mercy and real affection, emanate from God solely for the benefit of His pious men, and are by no means the result of any impression or change [produced in God].

The same is the case with all divine acts: though resembling those acts which emanate from our passions and psychical dispositions, they are not due to anything superadded to His essence.

The principal object of this chapter was to show that all attributes ascribed to God are attributes of His acts, and do not imply that God has any qualities.

In summary:

• **Yichud Hashem** - God’s ultimate Oneness means that we cannot ever have and definitive knowledge of the true essence of God.

• As such, we cannot describe God in positive terms, only in negative.

• This ‘negative theology’, whilst intellectually accurate, is emotionally unfulfilling. One certainly cannot develop a relationship with a Being only defined in negative terms.

• Therefore God has revealed to his his Middot - attributes through which we perceive His ACTIONS in our world. To define these is NOT to define God but our perception of God.

• Through the mitzva of Vehalachta Bidrachav - copying these Middot - we can then develop a fundamental religious ethic which precedes and underpins even Torah and Mitzvot.

Rav Kook sees Emuna as an innate and natural force in the Jewish soul. Where there are outside forces which disturb the equilibrium of the soul and prevent the expression of that emunah, intellectual and psycho-emotional routes to emuna may be needed to restore emuna to its natural state.

• Useful reading on Rav Kook’s approach to Emuna: *Da Ma Shetashiv Le’atzmecha* - Rav Zev Karov (1995).
• In Part 1 we discussed Rabbi Norman Lamm’s Faith & Doubt.

• Another highly recommended recent (2017) book is Reason to Believe by Rabbi Chaim Jachter. Like Rabbi Lamm’s work, this book is also directed towards the observant community and issues of Emuna for people with that background. He deals with many contemporary issues such as archeology, Torah and science and the miracles of modern day Israel, as well as classic issues of morality, theodicy and humanistic objections to Emuna. Rabbi Jachter divides rational connection to Emuna into 5 ‘portals’
  #1 - Arguments from Design, the Anthropic Principle and Nature as a Source of Love of God.
  #2 - The Tradition of Torah - Ramban and Kuzari.
  #3 - Jewish History and the Aruch HaShulchan’s argument for Emuna.
  #4 - Rav Soloveitchik’s Argument from Halacha.
  #5 - Prophecies which have been fulfilled in our times.

• For classic kiruv-focused arguments and discussions aimed more at the non-observant Jewish world see:
  - Permission to Believe - R. Lawrence Keleman (1991)
  - Reason to Believe - R. Dr. Dovid O (2017)