CHAPTER 4: SHEMA YISROEL AND ITS BLESSINGS PARAGRAPH 1:1

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Simply put, as every traditional Jew knows from childhood, the mitzvah to recite the "Sh'ma Yisroel" involves reading-out a number of Torah verses twice daily that assert that G-d is the only Deity (Deuteronomy 6:4), that there's a sure reward due those who serve Him (Deuteronomy 6:5-9, 11:13-21), and that underscore the fact of our having been freed from slavery in Egypt (Numbers 15:37-41). But as we'll soon see, there's far more to this mitzvah than that. We'll touch upon the first verse and its ramifications here, then explain the others afterward.

At bottom, we recite the first verse -- "Hear O Israel! G-d our L-rd is one G-d" -- in order to affirm our belief in G-d's oneness and to accept the yoke of His Kingdom upon ourselves. But that calls for a lot of explanation, for few of us fully understand the notion of G-d's oneness, and fewer of us today resonate with the idea of "accepting the yoke of Heaven upon ourselves", which illicits pictures of harnessed oxen turning round-and-round the same trough, day after day, and mindlessly so. It would serve us better to think of it as the act of willingly and earnestly taking G-d's guidance to heart and daily living a life based on its wise, soul-affirming mandates.

As to the more arcane theme of G-d's oneness, as we'd explained before, on one level it refers to the fact that G-d is depicted as "one" (as in "one of a kind") because He's the only utterly indispensable being (see 1:1:6). What that means to say is that while everything exists only because G-d wants it to (moment by moment), G-d exists independent and regardless of anything, and He's wholly and sublimely self-sufficient. That goes to explain one aspect of G-d's oneness and singularity, but there's another one as well.

In order to explore that one, let's start off by reflecting upon the layout of the cosmos in the broadest of all terms and go on from there. We're taught that G-d purposely created all sorts of celestial and mundane, spiritual and physical entities; and that He granted each a unique makeup suited to its raison d'etre as well as access to the wherewithal to fulfill it. Nonetheless, while everything thus seems to be driven by its own engine and to be running off on its own mission (with many side-ventures, to be sure), in truth, it's G-d's *single* and purposeful indomitable will that's behind and deeply within it all.

And so while G-d did indeed give everything the ability to be the master of its own realm on various levels and to fulfill many things in its ambit, the truth be known, *nothing has the ability or

prerogative to do anything other than what G-d wants*. For He is the "one" and only Sovereign of the Universe. All anything else can ever do, really, is what G-d gives it the ability and authorization to do; and only He can add to or take away from that authorization as He so desires. That's the other sense of the term "oneness" as it applies to G-d.

But there's also an even more arcane element involved, which touches upon the ironic existence of evil, that seems to countervail G-d's sovereignty and to have a mind of its own (see 1:5:8). But we learn that G-d purposefully allowed for evil to exist so as to grant us the freedom to opt for it, G-d forbid, should we so choose to as free entities.

Yet evil still-and-all seems to do or to encourage things that go against God's will and reign. After all, as we'd learned, G-d is all good and the ultimate and true benefactor, and His Name is besmirched when the wicked have power and the forces of evil seem to prevail. So how could that be?

But know that as those who are privy to G-d's ways and have reflected deeply upon their ramifications have informed us, the truth of the matter is that all of this -- G-d's all-goodness side-by-side with the preposterous concurrence of evil -- is all part of a vast and panoramic cosmic gyre of events necessary for the ultimate perfection of the universe.

And that once that's accomplished, evil will cease to exist. For G-d is indeed the only and actual Director of all things, His plans and will alone will endure, and His goodness will indeed be bestowed upon all His handiwork in unimaginatively fulsome ways.

Though the irony and enigma of that might be mind-boggling to us, it was nonetheless decreed that G-d's ultimate goal of universal perfection was to be accomplished in such a seemingly circuitous and labyrinthine way. Suffice it to say that it will become clear in the end that G-d alone brought all this about, and all so as to bring His ultimate goal to fruition. All of this figures into G-d's "oneness".

What has all this to do with our twice-daily recitation of the "Shema Yisroel"? We'll soon see.

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