

HOW WISE WE WOULD BE

by Rabbi Label Lam

Hear O' Israel, HASHEM is our G-d, HASHEM is One. And you should love HASHEM your G-d with all your heart and all your soul and with all your might. (Devarim 6:4-5)

You shall keep and perform them, for it is your wisdom and discernment in the eyes of the peoples, who shall hear all these decrees and say, "Surely a wise and discerning people is this great nation!" For which great nation has a G-d, Who is close to it, as is HASHEM our G-d, whenever we call to Him? Which great nation has righteous decrees and ordinances such as this entire Torah that I place before you this day? (Devarim 4:6-8)

What is the most important word in the Torah? True, all words are important! However, if you could highlight one word that is shouted the loudest and with the greatest frequency, which word would it be? You can only imagine that if this word is so important it must be the cure for many ills, personal and societal. If it's hard to conjure up the answer it's probably because the meaning has become obscured or it remains under-understood. Let's look together.

A Jew was riding on a train traversing the Siberian tundra. Seated next to him was a soldier of the Czar quietly boiling and seething with deep hatred toward the Jew. In one moment he let loose his anger to the Jew who, unaware of the danger, was staring into one of his holy books. He barked, "What makes you people so smart?"

The Jew was startled. He realized his life was at risk and he had better give the correct answer. Without hesitation, with help from heaven, he responded with perfect calm, one word - "Herring!" (That little bony fish) The soldier sternly inquired, "Do you have any?" The Jew acknowledged that he had a few pieces remaining which the soldier demanded with authority should be handed over to him.

Taking a big risk, the Jew refused and insisted he be compensated 20 Rubles for the now desirous herring. The soldier hurriedly threw the money at him and took hold of the prize. In a one gulp, like a hungry bear, he swallowed the whole lot of them. After wiping his mouth brutishly he turned to the Jew, who had calmly returned to his books, and protested, "20 Rubles for those few pieces of fish?! Where we are going to in Moscow I can get five times that amount for the same price!" At that point the Jew turned to him with a full face and declared, "You see, it's starting to work already!"

It's not just a joke. Perhaps the secret is in something like the herring- the hearing. What makes you people so smart? The hearing! Hear O' Israel... That statement is the clearest expression of the

mission of the Jewish People, singularly and collectively! Not only is it the declaration at each door - post of the Jewish home or the continuous cry of loyal Jewish tongues twice daily for thousands of years. It's the cry of the universe!

Isn't that what wives are telling husbands, often with desperation? How often do we hear these words, "He doesn't listen to me!" It's what parents are telling children and what children are telling parents. SHEMMA! Listen! It's what the teacher and student hope from each other for the relationship to succeed. Most importantly it's what THE ALMIGHTY shouts to His people, "SHEMA Yisrael" Listen Israel... It's also what we request in prayer daily, "Shema koleinu- HASHEM ELOCHEINU...Hear our voices HASHEM our G-d!

Here's a concept I've shared with my children at bedtime for years and recently I saw that the Vilna Gaon (Mishlei 4:1) defines the word SHEMA in the same three ways. Perhaps my approach is more playful but as I recently discovered, not less true. The word "SHEMA" with its three letters onomatopoetically sounds out three ideas that together may help us get our arms around that giant of a word- "SHEMA"

SHHH- Listen! Quiet down for a moment! Remove all external distractions. Focus undisturbed! (Not so easy!) MMMM- Understand! Hear well what's being said. Let the message be absorbed gently and thoughtfully into your system. Finally- AHHHH- Accept! Stop resisting what you know to be true in your heart of hearts! Surrender to an idea that is bigger than you! Be ready to act upon and live up to it. If only the word- "SHEMA" would be heard, understood, and accepted properly and exercised practically. What a different world and what a different life it would be and who knows how wise we would be.

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