

RECITING THE SHEMA

by Joshua Kruger

The Story

In the city of Balagan, on a street named Gevalt, lived the Mevulbal family. They were very nice and funny and very very very mixed up. Today Reuven, their son, was starting third grade after a fun summer break.

"Goodbye Mom and Dad. I'm off to school." he called out as he left his home.

"Have a great day, Reuven" replied Mrs. Mevulbal. "I hope you make lots of friends in your new class."

Reuven quickly found his way to school and entered the classroom.

"Boy, these kids are really short. I'm going to be the star basketball player" he thought.

"You must be Reuven Mevulbal" said the teacher.

"Yes" he said proudly. "How did you know?"

"Because this is a kindergarden class" smiled the teacher. "It seems that you're a bit mixed up. No worries, I'll take you to your class after we finish *tefila*". She offered Reuven a seat, and then began to sing *modeh ani* with the class.

"Oh my goodness" thought Reuven "these students aren't saying the words properly. They're going to need a lot of help."

Within a few minutes it was time to say the *keriyas shema*. Reuven covered his eyes with his hand. As the class starting saying the words he thought to himself "I wonder if these little kids know that they're supposed to cover their eyes?" He opened up his fingers slightly and peeked through them to check. He was happy to see that everyone else also had their eyes covered.

"Thank you for your help" whispered the teacher "but were you able to have *kavana* on the meaning of the words you just said?"

"Oh no!" thought Reuven. "I didn't. Do I have to say it again?"

The Discussion

Q: What is the connection between our story and the *parsha*?

A: The first section of *keriyas shema* is found in our *parsha* (*Devarim* 7:2).

Q: Reuven should have had *kavana* when he said the *shema*. Now that he has made the mistake, does he have to repeat it?

A: If someone performed a *mitzva* without *kavana*, there is a *machlokes* regarding whether the *mitzva* counts. Some *poskim* rule that the *mitzva* counts and that there is no need to repeat it. Other *poskim* rule that it doesn't count and needs to be repeated. However, in the case of saying the first two lines of *keriyas shema* ("*shema yisrael*" and "*baruch shem kevodo*"), all *poskim* agree that *kavana* is needed. Therefore, Reuven must repeat these *pesukim* (*Shulchan Aruch*, 63:4).

Q: What should we concentrate on when saying the first line of the *shema*?

A: There are two important thoughts to have:

- 1- Hashem is our G-d (*Elokeinu*)
- 2- There is only ONE Hashem (*Echad*)

Q: Why do we cover our eyes with our right hand when we say the first line of *shema*?

A: In order to help our *kavana* we cover our eyes in order to prevent us from being distracted by what is happening around us (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim*, 61:5). The first person recorded to have covered his eyes when he said *keriyas shema* was Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi (*Berachos* 13b).

(Written by Josh and Tammy Kruger, in collaboration with Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer of the Institute for Dayanim)