

THE KRIAS SHMA COVER UP: WHEN "SEEING" IS "NOT BELIEVING"

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Parshas Vayigash

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The following thought is printed in the introduction to the Responsa Kol Aryeh. I originally heard it when Rav Noson Kulefsky cited it at the funeral of his father Rav Yaakov Moshe Kulefsky, ZTL. It made a very profound impression on me at the time and I made a mental note to share it on an appropriate occasion.

As Yaakov was about to descend to Egypt, the Almighty appeared to him and told him: "I am the G-d - G-d of your father. Have no fear of descending to Egypt, for I shall establish you as a great nation there. I shall descend with you to Egypt, and I shall also surely bring you up; and Yoseph shall place his hand on your eyes." [Bereishis 46:3-4]. Regarding the words "and Yosef shall place his hand on your eyes" the Zohar comments: "This is what the secret of Krias Shma is all about."

What does this enigmatic comment of the Zohar mean? The Kol Aryeh explains this Zohar based on a Gemara [Pesachim 50a]: "Rav Acha bar Chanina states: This world is not like the next world. In this world one recites the blessing 'Blessed is the One who is good and does good' (HaTov U'Meitiv) on good news one recites the blessing 'Blessed is the True Judge' (Dayan haEmes) and on bad news. However, in the world to come, only 'Blessed is the One who is good and does good' is recited." The Gemara uses this teaching to explain the pasuk [verse] "And Hashem will be King over the entire world; on that day His Name will be One and He will be One." [Zecharia 14:9]

Rav Yechezkel Landau, (who lived in 18th century Prague) explains in his commentary 'Tzlach' on Tractate Pesachim that unfortunately we see things which are tragic in this world. Hopefully, there are occasions when we have good news, but this life is also filled with seemingly tragic events. A Jew must believe (this is easier said than done) that ultimately every thing is for the good. There have been tzadikim throughout the generations who were able to say 'this too is for the best ' (gam zu l'tova), no matter what happened to them in their lives. For most people, however, there is a dichotomy in this world between "good things" and "bad things". In the world to come, when we will not be bound by the restrictions of time and we will see everything in the context of the bigger

picture, we will be able to perceive that everything in fact is "good". Therefore, we will be capable of reciting - even on those things that appear "bad" - the blessing "HaTov u'Meitiv".

The Kol Aryeh cites his great teacher the Chasam Sofer (who lived 1762- 1839 in Hungary), who explains the Almighty's answer to Moshe's request "Show me, please, your glory" [Shemos 33:18]. Based on the Gemara [Brachos 7a], Moshe was thereby asking the profound and age-old question: "Why are there righteous people who suffer and wicked people who prosper?" The Almighty responded: "Behold! There is a place near Me; you may stand on the rock. When My glory passes by, I shall place you in a cleft of the rock; I shall shield you with My hand until I have passed. Then I shall remove My hand and you will see My back, but My face may not be seen." [Shemos 33:21-23]. The Chasam Sofer explains the idea of seeing G-d from the back but not from the front allegorically.

"My face may not be seen" means understanding things while they are happening. Man is incapable - from his perspective - of understanding the idea of the righteous suffering and the wicked prospering. Only if man "stands with G-d" and can see all of history from beginning to end will he have the ability to understand things in context and appreciate that everything is in fact for the best. "My back" means in retrospect - from the rear.

The belief that G-d always does what is good, is essentially what we say when we recite Krias Shma. Hear O Israel, the L-rd (Hashem) our G-d (Elo- keinu), the L-rd (Hashem) is One.

We are familiar with the idea that the word Elokeinu (our Elo-kim) is the Name of G-d that represents His attribute of Judgment. The name Hashem (Yud-Kay-Vov-Kay) is the Name that represents His attribute of Mercy. The interpretation of the declaration of Shma Yisrael is the following: "Understand O Israel the Name Hashem (Yud-Kay-Vov-Kay) representing mercy and compassion is identical with the Name - Elokeinu - our G-d of Justice; it is all one. He sometimes appears merciful and sometimes as a strict Judge, but we must believe that ultimately it all emerges from the name Hashem - the Name associated with Mercy.

The Talmud states [Berachos 13b] that when Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi recited Krias Shma, he would cover his eyes. Based on this passage, the Tur in Shulchan Aruch rules - and this is the universal practice - that every Jew should cover his eyes when reciting Krias Shma. Why do we do this? Because sometimes, when we try to say Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad [the L-rd our G- d the L-rd is One], attesting to our belief that the attribute of M ercy and the attribute of Justice are all the same, there are too many troubles right before our eyes to allow us to truly believe this testimony. It becomes difficult for us to say that everything is for the good. Therefore, we cover our eyes so that, symbolically at least, we do not see all the troubles.

The Kol Aryeh states if we want an example of this concept - that everything that the Almighty does - regardless of appearances - is truly all for the good, we can find it in the life of the righteous Yosef. His life personifies this belief. He was hated by his brothers, thrown into a pit, sold as a slave, libelously framed by his master's wife, and put into a dungeon where he languished for 12 years.

What was he thinking through all of this?

However, eventually, because he was in this dungeon in Egypt, he became known to Pharaoh, he became the second in command in Egypt, he sustained all of Egypt, and eventually saved his brothers and family from starvation. In the end, Yosef saw how all that happened to him indeed was for the best.

Therefore, G-d told Yaakov not to fear the descent to Egypt. Although Yaakov perceived prophetically that this would be the beginning of a long and bitter exile, G-d reassured him by saying, "Yosef will place his hands over your eyes." In other words, G-d was reminding Yaakov of all that happened to Yosef and that despite the trauma and troubles, all had worked out for the best in the end. Yosef personified the idea that apparent troubles can foreshadow great and positive outcomes.

"Yosef will cover your eyes." The Zohar states - "this is the secret of Krias Shma."

Now we understand the Zohar. The secret of Krias Shma is the unification of Hashem [G-d of Mercy] with Elokeinu [our G-d of Judgment]. This is sometimes hard to perceive unless we cover our eyes. Yosef (and all that happened to him in his life) should be our metaphorical model for covering our eyes and allowing ourselves to be convinced of the truth of this declaration of unification of G-d's attributes.

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