

PARSHAS VAESCHANAN - THE MEANING OF "ONE"

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The Meaning of "One"¹

Hear, Yisrael: Hashem is our G-d. Hashem is One.

Nothing sounds more natural to the Jewish ear than this simple and elegant formulation of Jewish faith. It is the first verse of the Torah that a small child is taught, and the last on the lips of a person as he departs this life. For centuries, it was the lifeline to a community from which a person found himself estranged. Jews who drifted away nonetheless retained the belief system incorporated in this verse. It would appear to have no match in Jewish Scripture.

The appearances are deceiving. There is a parallel passage, and it should be regarded as a close competitor for compact statement of faith. Moreover, it came first. "You have been shown to be made to know that Hashem is the G-d; there is no other besides Him[2]. You shall know today, and take it to heart, that Hashem is the G-d in the heavens above and on the earth below. There is nothing else.[3]

The differences between these two passages are instructive..

In the earlier passage, we do not hear, but see. For Jews, seeing very much is believing. Others claim to discover G-d in nature, or in the progress of history. These, however, are not the traditional portals into Jewish belief. Arguments based upon them may be helpful and even convincing for individuals, but as a people, we have no use for them. We saw the truth, in a way that banished all doubt. Our forefathers watched the display of Hashem's presence as He so dramatically freed them from Egyptian bondage. They stood at Sinai, and individually heard the Voice of Hashem proclaim His law to an assembly of an entire nation. Once belief was established beyond cavil, nature and history could assume their roles. They would not prove anything about G-d's existence. That work was already done. Rather, once that belief was firmly rooted, both nature and history became important lenses with which to observe Hashem's interaction with our world, and learn more about His ways. The same phenomena would mean little or nothing to the non-believer. To the Jew linked to our great past, however, every phenomenon in the natural world, whether large or small, points to His presence and wisdom; every event in the unfolding of history points to His guidance. Those who are unconvinced of His existence will be hard-pressed to prove it from nature or history. Those who are already convinced will look at the world and find nothing but His presence, confirmed in the greatness and majesty of the natural world, and the course of our history.

It then dawns upon us how different it is for us today - and indeed for every generation after the one that left Egypt. They saw. They experienced firsthand and directly. We, on the other hand, can only lay claim to what they understood by listening to what they have told us, to hearing their message. Hashem provided for us a firm basis of belief through a series of events and experiences unique in history. Provided once at the beginning of our peoplehood, they put our national belief on a firm footing, but they would not be repeated. They saw; we hear. Yet what we hear comes to us in an uninterrupted chain of transmission: a message of direct experience and certainty, not the speculation and wish-fulfillment of others.

Both of the passages encapsulate the experience of that first generation. The two passages are very different, and yet are really the same. While the earlier one speaks of learning through that experience of that generation that there is no "other," the Shema distills a few choice phrases into a single word: echad, or One.

We can understand this best by considering the ancient competitors to Jewish belief - competitors that still manifest themselves in contemporary belief systems and attitudes. The Shema's echad is, first and foremost, a monotheistic declaration by rejecting polytheism.

We may be dismissive of polytheism as a primitive belief, and miss how convincing it was (and continues to be!) to those who did not have the benefit of our national experience. Everywhere we look, we meet up with apparent disparity and difference - certainly not unity. Whether in the antagonistic relationships we observe in the macrocosm - life and death, light and darkness, rising and falling - or the tensions we feel within ourselves - love and hate, joy and sadness - we see and feel variety, not sameness and unity. Ancient man came to grips with these observations by attaching them to separate gods. Loosely, they divided phenomena into two groups - those they found to be agreeable, and those to which they objected. The first group were assumed to be within the domain of a benign deity of good, light and life; the others belonged to gods of evil, darkness and death. Whether through belief in two gods locked in eternal battle, or two groups of gods, each promoting antagonistic agendas, ancient man found it hard to escape a dualism that seemed apparent to him. This dualism still haunts modern man, who at times cannot find any way to bring the two sets of phenomena under one umbrella.

The first level of meaning in the Shema is the declaration that difference and tension are illusory. They are not the consequence of battle between two forces or powers, but flow from the One G-d.

This understanding alone would be a remarkable insight, and a huge step forward for mankind. It would not, however, do justice to the lesson of the Shema. Our pasuk does not merely claim that the battle is a sham, that G-d is somehow big enough to contain apparent opposites. The Shema goes much further. G-d is not just the single Source of the different notes of one composition. Within Him, the dissonance and discord disappears, leaving only harmony. The name Hashem indicates love and compassion, while Elokim denotes judgment and consequence. In the Shema, they both

come together: Hashem is Elokeinu; they are two aspects of the same Being. We may see them or experience them as opposite traits and phenomena, but this is inaccurate. In reality, G-d's judgment is nothing more than a manifestation of His love. His achdus, His Oneness means that the opposites are not just resident in the same G-d, so much as that they are not opposite at all.

Some would translate our pasuk differently, and detect an altogether different message. We have translated echad as One, or the only One, and seen it as a declaration of essential unity in place of apparent disunity and antagonism. The Shema surgically removes the chief cause of belief in beings other than the One true G-d - our detection of many-ness rather than one-ness. The Shema declares that finding to be a sham, a massive misunderstanding. Some people, however, see in the Shema a description of G-d's inner nature, a peak into His transcendence. Echad becomes not One, in the sense of the only One, without peer, but One in the sense of an essential unity, not composed of different parts[4]. We do not find support for this in Chazal. Furthermore, it turns our most important lesson about how to practically relate to G-d, and turns it into an esoteric discipline that cannot have immediate meaning to us. It may also violate our understanding of our limitations as human beings to make accurate descriptive statements about the inscrutable reality of G-d.

The last letter of echad is written with a large letter. So is the last letter of acher, in an earlier pasuk about bowing to other gods[5]. The Torah seems determined that we not get the two confused, and recognize the difference between the One G-d, and the false ones. Interestingly, the word acher is formed when the last letter is a reish, whose top left surface is round, rather than angular. The daled of echad is formed by simply turning that rounded surface into a sharp corner. So many others have missed the point of His Oneness by missing the sharpness of precise, rigorous thinking. They have taken the more accommodating and smooth, pliable route - but in so doing, distorted the truth of His uniqueness.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 6:4

2. Devarim 4:35 3. Devarim 4:39 4. His intention here is a bit obscure. The different translations present different approaches. I was unable to get to the German original to determine his actual intent

5. Shemos 34:14
