

# KERIAS SHEMA: DO WE HAVE PROPER KAVANAH? WHAT TYPE OF KAVANAH IS NEEDED?

*by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt*

There are two types of kavanah that are required for Kerias Shema. The first is the kavanah needed to fulfill one's obligation of reciting Kerias Shema: Before beginning to recite Shema, one should have the intention of fulfilling mitzvas Kerias Shema. Although one who recites Shema as part of his daily davening has an "automatic" degree of intention to fulfill his obligation - why is he reciting Shema just now if not because of the mitzvah to recite Kerias Shema - nevertheless, it is proper to have specific intention to fulfill the mitzvah.(1)

The second type of kavanah required is to understand the basic meaning of the words being recited. One who recites Shema but does not understand what he is saying, has not fulfilled the mitzvah.

## WHICH PART OF KERIAS SHEMA REQUIRES KAVANAH?

L'chatchilah, one should understand the basic meaning of the entire Kerias Shema. As he pronounces each word, he should have in mind the meaning of the words that he is saying. This requires full concentration, and it is the proper and preferred manner in which to perform this mitzvah.(2)

If it is difficult to achieve such intense kavanah, one fulfills the mitzvah b'dieved even if he only had kavanah for [in order of preference]:

- 1.The first parashah (the parashah of Shema Yisrael... V'ahavta)(3;)
- 2.The first verse of Shema Yisrael and Baruch Shem(4;)
- 3.The verse of Shema Yisrael. (5)

## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE IF ONE FAILED TO CONCENTRATE DURING THE FIRST VERSE OF SHEMA YISRAEL?

One who failed to concentrate during the first verse of Shema Yisrael(6) must repeat Shema. Since it is forbidden to repeat a word(,7) or even an entire verse of Shema Yisrael,(8) it is advisable to finish the first parashah and then start again from the beginning.(9) Other poskim allow repetition during Kerias Shema [when one failed to concentrate] if the following two conditions are met: 1) it is done

quietly enough that no one else can hear; and 2) only an entire verse at a time may be repeated; single words may not be repeated.(10)

One who remembered - while reciting the second parashah of Kerias Shema (V'hayah im shamo'a) - that he failed to concentrate during the recitation of the first verse of Shema Yisrael, should finish the second parashah, repeat the first verse and the first parashah (V'ahavta), and continue on to the third parashah (Va-yomer).

If, after reciting the second parashah, one remembers that he did not concentrate properly during the first verse of Shema Yisrael, he must repeat the first verse and the first parashah (V'ahavta), but no more than that.(11)

## **WHAT IS THE MINIMUM KAVANAH REQUIRED FOR THE FIRST VERSE OF SHEMA YISRAEL?**

The basic meaning of the first verse of Shema Yisrael combines two themes: 1) Hashem is our G-d - a declaration of accepting Hashem's sovereignty over us, and 2) Hashem is one - a proclamation of His status as the exclusive power controlling the entire world. When reciting Kerias Shema, therefore, one must bear in mind the following basic meaning: Hear O Yisrael, Hashem is our G-d and we accept His kingdom, and He is the only G- d - up, down and in all four directions.(12) This is the minimum degree of kavanah which is acceptable. If one did not have this idea in mind when reciting Shema Yisrael, his recitation is invalid and must be repeated as outlined above.

In addition to this basic meaning, there is another level of kavanah pertaining to the deeper meaning of the two Names of Hashem mentioned in the first verse. The name "Hashem" has two meanings: The first meaning is based on the way Hashem's Name is pronounced, Ad-onai, which refers to Hashem as Master of all. The other meaning, based on the manner in which Hashem's Name is written, Y-k-v-k, refers to Hashem's essence as the One who was, is, and will always be, timeless and infinite. The name Elokeinu refers to Hashem being the Almighty, Omnipotent and the Master of all powers. The halachah is that one should bear in mind all of these meanings when reciting the Names of Hashem during Kerias Shema.(13) B'dieved, however, one who did not does not need to repeat Kerias Shema.(14)

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## **FOOTNOTES:**

1 Mishnah Berurah 60:10 quoting Chayei Adam.

2 Mishnah Berurah 61:1, 4-5.

3 Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5, to fulfill the view of those (see Berachos 13b) who require this.

4 Mishnah Berurah 63:11 quoting Magen Avraham. According to the view of the Mishnah Berurah, this is the minimum requirement. One who failed to have kavanah during Baruch Shem must repeat the Shema.

5 Aruch ha-Shulchan 61:6;63:6; Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5. If he remembers before beginning to recite V'ahavta, then he is required to repeat Baruch Shem. If he remembers after starting V'ahavta, then he is no longer required to repeat Baruch Shem. He may, however, do so provided that he starts Shema all over again.

6 In addition, one must not think other thoughts during Kerias Shema, even when not actually saying the words. According to some poskim, those thoughts may constitute a hefsek which may invalidate the Kerias Shema; - see Mishnah Berurah 63:13 and Beur Halachah 101:1 quoting the Rashba and Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5.

7 Even b'dieved it is possible that one has not fulfilled the mitzvah if he repeated a word of Kerias Shema; - see Beur Halachah 61:9 and Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5.

8 O.C. 61:9.

9 Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5.

10 Mishnah Berurah 61:22, 23; 63:14.

11 Based on Mishnah Berurah 63:14.

12 In some siddurim there is a reference to "Hashem being king over the seven heavens." There are many sources for this; see Bayis Yosef O.C. 61 quoting the Smak, and quoted further by several later poskim; see Shulchan Aruch Harav, Derech ha-Chayim and Aruch ha-Shulchan. But in the opinion of Harav M. Feinstein, one should not have this intention when reciting Kerias Shema; see -Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5. For a full explanation, see The Weekly Halachah Discussion, Hebrew Notes, pg. 267

13 Mishnah Berurah 5:3. Indeed, these meanings should be thought about not only during Kerias Shema but each time Hashem's name is mentioned.

14 Igros Moshe O.C. 5:5.

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