

ספר בעל שם טוב על התורה - פרשת ואתחנן

יג. שמע ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד, הכוונה של אחד של היחוד של קריאת שמע, לכוון שאין בכל העולם רק הקדוש ברוך הוא שמלא כל הארץ כבודו, ועיקר הכוונה, שהאדם ישים את עצמו לאין ואפס, ואין עיקרו רק הנשמה שבו, שהוא חלק אלהי ממעל, נמצא שאין בכל העולם רק הקדוש ברוך הוא אחד, ועיקר הכוונה באחד שיכוון שמלא כל הארץ כבודו, ואין שום דבר פנוי ממנו יתברך שמו:

We say, "Listen closely Yisrael: YHVH is our God, YHVH is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4)

The intention (*kavanah*) of One (*echad*), of the unification (*yichud*) of saying the Shema is that one should direct one's mind to [the idea] that there is nothing else in the world besides the Blessed Holy One, that the whole earth is filled with Divine glory (Isaiah 6:3, *m'lo kol ha'aretz k'vodo*). The essence of of the *kavanah* is that one should make oneself as nothing, as vast emptiness (*ayin v'efes*), that one is nothing but one's essence/soul (*neshamah*), which is a part of Divinity from Above. Therefore, nothing exists in the world except the absolute Unity which is God. And the essence of the *kavanah* of *echad* is to intend that the whole earth is filled with Divine glory. There is therefore no place devoid of Divinity, may Its Name be blessed.

(*Sefer Baal Shem Tov, Parshat V'etchanan, #13*)

Keri'at Shema'

The Zohar understands *shema' yisra'el* as referring to what it calls "the upper unity," the absolute oneness of all being in Y-H-W-H, after creation as before, the world having no definitive reality at all. *Barukh shem*, the whispered response to it, represents the "lower unity," the sense that despite the fragmentation of being, transforming Y-H-W-H into HaWaYaH, "existence" as we know it, the oneness persists, God being the underlying truth of each individual being that exists. This truth, however, may not be spoken aloud, teaches the Tanya, because that would keep us from living our "normal" lives and fulfilling the tasks we are given to do in this earthly realm. Our task is to convince the spiritually longing and God-loving soul within us not to leave the body for some higher (or "deeper") realm, but to work with it to live the good life here and now. The whisper is addressed to that soul.

ה' אלהינו ה'

Y-H-W-H *eloheynu* Y-H-W-H.

The three divine names standing at the center of the *shema'* form the subject of many interpretations in the Zohar and elsewhere. Here is my reading of them. You may also see my understanding of these three words as a summary of my entire approach to the question of *raza' di-meheymanuta'*, the secret of faith. The first Y-H-W-H represents *keter*, the most sublime and unknowable mystery. That primal state of Being is often called *ayin*, "the No-thing," because it is utterly beyond our understanding. Some Kabbalists also call it "the air that cannot be grasped." This is Y-H-W-H in its conjugation as EHYEH, "I am what I am," or "I shall be whatever I shall be." We stand before this mystery in silent awe, aware of its presence but unable to respond. But then we discover *eloheynu*, our God, the presence of the One within us, around us, filling our hearts as it fills all that is. We allow it to become one with our own souls, which are only a mirror of its light. In doing this, we give to the One the only gift we have to offer, that of our own humanity. *Va-ani tefillati*, as the Ba'al Shem Tov understood it: "I am my prayer." All of our frailty and mortality, but also the opening of our hearts to love and joy, are here joined to *shekhinah*, the Presence that dwells within. In this opening we help to give birth to a new Y-H-W-H, this time as *kudsha' berikh hu'*, the projected Parent, Ruler, Lover, Friend to whom we can relate in devotion and intimacy.

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Comments on the Siddur, Arthur Green