

Rabbi Shalom Carmy

# The First Two Sections of Keriyat Shema: Comparison, Contrast, and the Context of Devarim

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The sections of *Shema* and *Ve-hayah im shamo'a* are conjoined in three contexts: (1) They constitute two of the four portions inscribed in the *tefillin* and *mezuzah*. Since *tefillin* are first mentioned in *Shemot* chapter 13, the Netziv held that these two sections were known during the Israelites' wanderings in the desert as independent literary units used to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, before these sections were given as part of the Torah. (2) Of course these two sections now appear in *Devarim* as part of the Torah. Although they are not -juxtaposed – *Shema* appears in chapter 6 and *Ve-hayah* in chapter 11 – we shall see that they are connected literarily. (3) *Shema* is the first portion of *Keriyat Shema* recited morning and evening, while *Ve-hayah* follows it as the second portion. The obligation to read *Ve-hayah* is probably rabbinic;<sup>329</sup> even the recitation of the first section of *Shema* (as opposed to the first verse – “*Shema Yisrael*”) may be rabbinic.

As early as the *Mishnah* (*Berakhot* 2:1) R. Yehoshua ben Korchah explains that *Shema* precedes *Ve-hayah* because accepting the yoke of Heaven precedes accepting the yoke of commandments. *Tosafot* (14b s.v. *lamah*) ask why this reason is necessary, when the order can be justified based on the order in the Torah. They answer that in *Ve-hayah* Israel is addressed in the plural, while *Shema* addresses the individual. Were it not for the argument that the personal commitment to serve God logically precedes the particular commandments one might expect the plural formula to override the order in the Torah. That is why the theological consideration is needed.

Why should the plural formula carry so much weight that the *Halakhah* was almost prepared to allow this factor to trump the order in the Torah? The Maharsha (13a s.v. *lamah*) suggests that approaching God as part of the community of Israel is superior to coming before Him as individuals. Note that this explanation presupposes that the reading of *Shema* functions not only as an act of resolution in which one commits oneself to God but also partakes of the nature of prayer – and indeed there are many *halakhot* that mandate integrating the *Shema* with the *Amidah* that follows, so this is a theme that subsists even according to the conclusion that we recite *Shema* first.

R. Kook (*Ein Ayah* 2:1) directs our attention to the content of the two commitments. Commitment begins with deeds; actions precipitate recognition. Therefore, the logical order should move from *Ve-hayah*, the yoke of *mitzvot*, and then to the knowledge of God in the first section of *Shema*. The order adopted by the *Halakhah*, however, leans on the formula “*Shema Yisrael*” – “Hear O Israel.” We approach God as part of a faith community and a tradition. Through that connection it is possible to accept the yoke of Heaven prior to the yoke of His commandments.

The sources we have just related discuss the considerations that determine the order of the *parashiyot* (sections) in our performance of the *mitzvah*. What about the order in the Torah? Offhand the Maharsha's explanation is linked to *Shema* as part of the prayer service and is therefore irrelevant to the placement in the Torah. R. Kook's analysis might be pertinent to the Torah arrangement as well.

Of course, my last comment presupposes that the order of the two sections in *Devarim* is significant. The Rambam (*Hilkhos Keriyat Shema* 2:11) may be taken to say the opposite. He rules that one who recited the two sections out of order has nonetheless fulfilled the obligation because the two sections are not consecutive in the Torah. But it would be a mistake to hold that according to the Rambam the order in the Torah is arbitrary. What he means is that,

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<sup>329</sup>. This view was championed in *Sha'agat Aryeh*, section 2, against the *Peri Chadash*. The Rambam is the medieval authority most associated with the view that *Ve-hayah* is a biblical commandment. In the light of *Sha'agat Aryeh's* arguments, R. Soloveitchik suggested that the obligation, according to the Rambam, is separate from the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven contained in *Shema* (see R. Menachem Genack, *Shi'urei Ha-Rav Al Inyenei Tefillah U-Keriyat Shema*, section 5).

unlike a person who jumbled the verses within each portion, and who would thus be violating the inner structure of the text, and who therefore would *not* fulfill the obligation, the individual who switched two entire sections would be reading each one properly, even though this is not the order of the biblical text nor the order mandated by the *Halakhah*.

## II

In my opinion, the two sections are intimately intertwined from a literary perspective, and not only because they are both part of *tefillin*. The strongest common denominator is that both sections contain the same *mitzvot*: in *Shema* we have Torah study, *tefillin*, and *mezuzah*; in *Ve-hayah* the order is different – *tefillin* precedes Torah, and is followed by *mezuzah*.

*Tsafot* alerted us to one of the salient differences between the sections: The paragraph of *Shema* is in the second person singular; *Ve-hayah* is in the second person plural.

*Shema* contains the principle of the unity of God. *Shema* also contains the principle of the unity of commitment. In *Shema* we are commanded to love God, and love is defined as wholehearted: with heart and soul and your possessions. *Ve-hayah* does not contain this commandment: it speaks instead of the consequences of obedience or disobedience. In the former case God addresses Israel directly, promising worldly success. In the latter case, where the people are disobedient and serve other gods, the punishments are pronounced by Moshe, and the punitive God is presented in the third person (“And He will arrest the heavens and there will be no rain” as opposed to “I will give the rain of your land in due time”). The link between obedience to God and worldly outcomes is what Jewish thought would call “service motivated by fear,” in contrast with *Shema*’s demand for the reckless abandon of love.

Note, however, that *Ve-hayah* does not contain a commandment to fear God either. It presupposes, as a psychological fact, that worldly consequences brought about by Divine reaction to our actions are a motivating force. The commandment to fear God appears in the Torah in the section following *Shema*’s command to love Him: “You shall fear the Lord your God” (*Devarim* 6:13). Thus we have two contrasts between *Shema* and *Ve-hayah*: love vs. considerations of consequences; and also love as commandment as opposed to fear as an aspect of human motivational psychology rather than as a response to an imperative.<sup>330</sup>

Lest you deem this last distinction insignificant, consider the Ramban’s comment on the commandment to love God. The Ramban recognizes that wholehearted love, as commanded in *Shema*, excludes extraneous motivations. Why then does *Devarim* frequently promise worldly reward or the reverse if Israel disobeys? The Ramban quotes *Devarim* 4:1, 4:40, and 6:8; he does not quote 6:13, which commands fear of God. The Ramban offers two responses to his question: the first is that the warning to fear God is “by way of chastisement” (“*al derekh ha-tokhechot*”); the second is that the devoted worshipper is obligated both to love God and to fear Him. The first answer thus does not appeal to the idea of commandment to explain the frequent warnings. The way of *tokhechot* differs from that of *mitzvot*. As we said, the former is about psychological motives; the latter is about religious obedience and the normative experience of God. Again, *Ve-hayah* does not present the commandment.

Not only do the three commandments that belong to both sections appear in a different order, they are also formulated differently.

In both sections the commandment relating to Torah study centers on teaching: Torah study is not conceived as a purely solitary, detached activity but as an act of dialogical transmission. In *Shema* we repeat the words of Torah (“*shinun*,” an unusual word) to our children and we are to speak them ourselves. In *Ve-hayah* it is the children who are to be taught (using the more common word “*limud*” that appears elsewhere in *Devarim*) to speak the words of Torah. In *Shema*, it would seem, the act of communication engenders one’s own study as well. In *Ve-hayah*, it seems that Torah study is defined only in terms of educating the new generation.

It is noteworthy that these commandments have a novel aspect in *Devarim*. The Ramban observes that Torah study is presupposed in the earlier books of the *Chumash*: how is the law set down for future generations if it is not transmitted?<sup>331</sup> Yet it is significant that *Devarim* does not merely presuppose the communication of Torah but makes the teaching and study of Torah a particular commandment.<sup>332</sup>

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<sup>330</sup>. See my “‘Yet My Soul Drew Back’: Fear of God as Experience and Commandment in an Age of Anxiety” (*Tradition*, 41:3, pp. 1–30); also in *Yirat Shamayim: The Awe, Reverence, and Fear of God*, edited by Marc D. Stern, (New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of Yeshiva University Press), 265–299, for a fuller analysis of the relation between love and fear of God. My discussion here breaks new ground.

<sup>331</sup>. The Ramban’s concern, of course, is about the degree of novelty in *Devarim*, a topic he sets forth in his introduction to *Devarim*.

<sup>332</sup>. In fact the word “*limud*” first occurs in *Devarim*. It is absent from the rest of the Torah.

Likewise, the instruction regarding *tefillin* in *Shemot* (ch. 13) is that the word of God should be “placed as a sign on your hand and an adornment on your forehead.” In *Devarim* this becomes an act of “binding” (“*u-keshartam*”), language that focuses on the externalized act of binding one’s arm with the *tefillin*.

### III

*Devarim* is the book of the Torah that emphasizes human inwardness. All the “philosophical” commandments addressed to intellect and emotions are formally introduced in *Devarim*: unity of God, love of God, fear of God, imitation of God, cleaving unto Him (*deveikut*), Torah study, prayer, blessing God after eating.<sup>333</sup> They are introduced in the part of the book beginning with *Shema*, which follows right after Moshe’s recounting of the Sinai theophany, and ending with *Ve-hayah*. Earlier the Torah extols *deveikut* (4:2 – “And you who cleave unto God are all alive today”) and commands us to remember and re-experience the giving of the Torah, but does not lay down other “duties of the heart.” In my view, it was only after the new generation grew up in the desert, and experienced forty years of education, that such commandments could be placed at the center of religious life.<sup>334</sup> Once Moshe narrates the Sinai experience, he communicates the primary commandments of religious inwardness.

If my thesis is correct, it explains the distinctiveness of the unit stretching from the end of the Ten Commandments to the end of *Parashat Eikev*: a largely halakhic section, but one dealing with inward duties. We would then understand why the two interlinked sections of *Shema* and *Ve-hayah* bracket this section.

My view also explains the differences between the earlier presentations in the Torah and *Devarim*. In *Shemot* the *tefillin* are placed on our arms and heads, symbolizing the memory of the Exodus. In *Devarim* the act of binding ourselves with *tefillin* represents commitment of one’s life to God. Knowledge of the Torah by the next generation is presupposed throughout the Torah; in *Devarim* it becomes an encompassing way of life, “when you dwell at home or walk on your way.”<sup>335</sup>

### IV

What about the differences between *Shema* and *Ve-hayah*? The commandment to love God to the point of wholehearted passion, without reservation, is addressed to the individual, like the commandment to recognize the unity of God to which it is linked. Perhaps, as R. Kook held, it is easier to reach that concept of God against the background of the collective experience of Israel – indeed my thesis is that it took no less than a full generation of experience to prepare the people for that commitment. But the experience of total commitment to the one God is ultimately an individual one. Given the frailties of human nature, the many can maintain such commitment only with the aid of other non-normative motives, through fear, not of God necessarily, but of the consequences of flouting Him, or through attraction to the rewards He may offer. That is why *Shema* speaks to the singular person, while *Ve-hayah* is in the plural.

As we noted, both *Shema* and *Ve-hayah* describe Torah study as dialogical – the father and his children. Yet *Shema* is about the love of the individual for God. Hence the passion of teaching is expressed in terms of the unusual word “*ve-shinantam*” and the goal of study is that you, yourself, should be preoccupied with Torah. Since the theme of *Ve-hayah*, by contrast, is collective, study is described with the straightforward term “*limud*” – “teaching,” and the purpose of the teaching is measured by the outcome in the next generation.

Because the subject of *Shema* is love of God, that is to say, knowing God, the study of Torah comes before the physical *mitzvot* associated with commitment to God – *tefillin* and *mezuzah*. A change in the order of clauses may be conventional when a biblical text echoes another one (a phenomenon known as “Seidel’s law”); nonetheless the particular switch in this case – putting *tefillin* before Torah study – corresponds to the movement from “accepting the yoke of Heaven” to accepting the “yoke of commandments.”

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<sup>333</sup>. The Rambam (*Sefer Ha-Mitzvot, mitzvot aseh 1*) counts belief in the existence of God as a commandment, based on *Shemot* 20:1. From a literary perspective, however, even the Rambam must concede that this commandment is formulated as a declaration. Perhaps it is axiomatic: the giving of the Torah makes no sense otherwise. Note also that the Rambam refers to the existence of God (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:6) as “the great principle” (“*ha-ikar ha-gadol*”) on which everything depends and uses the same phrase for the unity of God (*Hilkhot Keriyat Shema* 1:2) as if the latter is an elaboration of the former.

<sup>334</sup>. The only other writer known to me to comment on the shift in *Devarim*, regarding love of God, is the *Tzemach Tzedek* (*Derekh Mitzvotekha* 398), whose explanation is diametrically opposed to mine. In his view, the command to love God was unnecessary in the desert because everyone was on such a high level. For another example of the Torah deferring until *Devarim* an idea better appropriated by the generation of the sons, see my “We Were Slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt: Literary-Theological Notes on Slavery and Empathy,” *Hebraic Political Studies* 4:4, pp. 367–380.

<sup>335</sup>. *Mezuzah* is not mentioned explicitly in *Shemot*, presumably because Israel did not dwell in houses in the desert.

## V

The Torah prefaced the unity of God and the commandment of love with the experience of Sinai. This experience includes both the content of Divine revelation and the feelings that accompanied it – the fear and trembling, and the associated warnings about the consequences of apostasy. When the Torah then moved on to articulate the various commandments of the heart, the commandment of love preceded the commandment to fear God, as the Ramban noted (*Devarim* 6:13). The section of *Ve-hayah im shamo'a* devotes a great deal of space to the consequences of obedience and disobedience before recapitulating anew the three commandments to study and keep the word of God present on our bodies and in our homes. As the section containing the duties of the heart concludes with these commandments complementing the psychological motive of fear of punishment and hope for reward, so too the order of prayer begins with *Shema* and then continues with *Ve-hayah im shamo'a*, a portion containing the commitment to the yoke of the commandments.