

קריאת שמע וברכותיה Shema and Its Blessings: Listening and Doing

1. Abraham Joshua Heschel, "On Prayer"

The malignity of our situation is increasing rapidly, the magnitude of evil is spreading furiously, surpassing our ability to be shocked. The human soul is too limited to experience dismay in proportion to what has happened in Auschwitz, in Hiroshima.

We do not know what to pray for. Should we not pray for the ability to be shocked at atrocities committed by man, for the capacity to be dismayed at our inability to be dismayed?

Prayer should be an act of catharsis, of purgation of emotions, as well as a process of self-clarification, of examining priorities, of elucidating responsibility. Prayer not verified by conduct is an act of desecration and blasphemy. Do not take a word of prayer in vain. Our deeds must not be a refutation of our prayers...

Prayer is meaningless unless it is subversive, unless it seeks to overthrow and to ruin the pyramids of callousness, hatred, opportunism, falsehoods. The liturgical movement must become a revolutionary movement, seeking to overthrow the forces that continue to destroy the promise, the hope, the vision...

Dark is the world to me, for all its cities and stars. *If not for my faith that God in His silence still listens to a cry, who could stand such agony?*

2. R. Yitzchak Aboab, Menorat ha-Maor (pg. 212, Mosad ha-Rav Kook ed.)

מצאתי כתוב כי לכן נקראו השירים מזמורים מלשון לא תזמר (ויקרא כה:ד) ולפי זה זמירות רוצה לומר זמורות שכשם שהמזמר בגפנים יקוץ כל הזמורות ויניח מה שראו לרטב כך הזמירות שאנו אומרים קודם התפלה יסירו ויקוצו כל המכשולות והעונות שיש לנו לפני השם וכשתבוא תפלתנו שתהיה נשמעת ורצויה לפני השם .

I found it written that the songs [of the Psalms] are called *mizmorim* based on the language of the Biblical verse You shall not prune (*Lo Tizmor*, [Vayikra 25:4](#), referring to the prohibitions of the *Shemita* year). And according to this, the word *zemirot* refers to *z'morot* (prunings). For just like one who prunes vines has to trim all the branches (*z'morot*) and leave behind that which should become wet. So too, the *zemirot* that we recite before *tefila* are meant to remove and cut off all the stumbling blocks and sins that stand in the way of God. So that when our prayers reach God, they will be heard and desired by God.

3. R. Jeff Fox, Introduction to Pesukei d'Zimra (8)

<https://roshyeshivatmaharat.org/2020/08/introduction-to-pesukei-dzimra-8-shaarei-ora-h-menorat-ha-maor/>

One of the greatest challenges to prayer today is our inability to truly focus on one task at a time (*kavana*). Even as I am writing this essay, I have ten other tabs open on my computer. Pruning away extraneous thoughts, ideas, and tabs is not simple. For these mystics *pesukei d'zimra* offers us a few moments of pruning every single day.

Learning to be in the moment and not pulled by our phones, our email or our next appointment is a life-long goal. This is true for counselors, teachers, parents and Rebbeim. We all know what it is like to truly listened to. To have someone give you their complete attention even if for only a few minutes. Practicing that skill with God helps us to be better listeners for our own friends, students and children. Developing the ability to be truly present for another does not happen on its own, it requires time and training. For the *Sha'arei Or* and *Menorat ha-Maor*, *pesukei d'zimra* is a daily practice that helps cultivate this essential spiritual life-skill.

4. Yotzer Or, Blessings Before Shema, Siddur

ברוך אתה יְקוּם אֱלֹהֵינוּ מְלִךְ הָעוֹלָם יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא אֶת-הַכֹּל:

Blessed are You, Hashem our God, King of the Universe, Former of light, Creator of darkness, Maker of peace, Creator of all things.

5. Isaiah 45:7

יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא רָע אֲנִי יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה כָּל-אֵלֶּה:

I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I, Hashem, do all these things.

6. Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 12b

מאי מְבָרַךְ? אָמַר רַבִּי יַעֲקֹב אָמַר רַבִּי אוֹשַׁעֲיָא: "יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ". לִימָא: "יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבוֹרֵא נוֹגֵה" ! כְּדַכְתִּיב קְאָמְרִינוּ. אֵלֶּה מַעֲתָה "עֹשֶׂה שְׁלוֹם וּבוֹרֵא רָע", מִי קָא אָמְרִינוּ כְּדַכְתִּיב? ! אֵלֶּה כְּתִיב "רָע" וְקָרִינוּ "הַכֹּל" לִישְׁנָא מְעַלְיָא, הָכָא נִמְי לִימָא "נוֹגֵה", לִישְׁנָא מְעַלְיָא! אֵלֶּה אָמַר רַבָּא: כְּדִי לְהַזְכִּיר מַדַּת יוֹם בְּלֵילָה וּמַדַּת לַיְלָה בַּיּוֹם.

What is the beracha? R. Yaakov said in the name of R. Yoshia, "Yotzer or u'vorei choshech – God creates light and fashioned darkness." Let him say, "[God] Who creates light and fashions brightness (noga)"? We say the blessing as the verse is written in the Bible. But if so, do we say, "I make peace and fashion evil" as it is written [in the Bible]? Rather, it is written "[creator of] evil" and we euphemistically say "[creator of] everything?" Here, too, let us euphemistically say brightness (noga) instead of darkness. Rather, Rava said: (The reason we recite: "Who creates darkness") is in order to mention the attribute of day at night and the attribute of night during the day.

7. Maharal, Netiv Ha-Avodah 7, Netivot Olam

ולפיכך צריך להזכיר מדת יום בלילה ומדת לילה ביום, כי היום מחייב את הלילה והלילה מחייב את היום ואין זה בלא זה כיון ששניהם משלימים זה לזה עד ששניהם ביחד יום אחד, ואם היה מזכיר היום בפני עצמו או הלילה בפני עצמו, היה שבח הש"י על חצי דבר ואין ראוי לשבח את הש"י על חצי דבר. ועוד כי הלילה והיום הוא אחד, וזה מורה כי הש"י אשר ברא אותם הוא אחד.

And therefore we must mention "the aspect of day at night and the aspect of night at day," for the day demands that the night comes and the night demands that the day comes, and neither one can exist without the other for both of them complete the other until both of them are one day. And if you were to mention the day without the night or the night without the day, it would

be an inappropriate half-praise of God. And also, because the night and the day are one – and this teaches us the God, who created them both, is One.

8. R. Jeff Fox, Introduction to Shema and Its Berachot (2)

<https://roshyeshivatmaharat.org/2020/10/introduction-to-shema-and-its-berachot-2-foundational-texts-2-bavli-11a/>

Built into the structure of these blessings is a religious desire to show that God can be found both in the day and the night. God is present both in our moments of great joy as well as deep sorrow... A central message of prayer in general, and this section in particular, is to learn to see the light in the darkness and to always be aware of the darkness in the light.

9. Yotzer Or, Blessings Before Shema, Siddur

לְאֵל בְּרוּךְ נְעִימוֹת יִתְּנוּ. לְמֶלֶךְ אֵל חַי וְקַיִם זְמֵרוֹת יֹאמְרוּ וְתִשְׁבְּחוֹת יִשְׁמְעוּ. כִּי הוּא לְבָדוּ
פּוֹעֵל גְּבוּרוֹת. עוֹשֶׂה חֲדָשׁוֹת. בְּעַל מַלְחָמוֹת. זֹרַע צְדָקוֹת. מַצְמִיחַ יְשׁוּעוֹת. בּוֹרֵא רְפוּאוֹת.
נוֹרָא תְהִלּוֹת. אֲדוֹן הַנִּפְלְאוֹת: הַמְחַדֵּשׁ בְּטוּבוֹ בְּכָל-יוֹם תְּמִיד מַעֲשֵׂה בְּרָאשִׁית: כְּאָמוֹר
לַעֲשֵׂה אוֹרִים גְּדוֹלִים כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֲסֵדוֹ: אוֹר חֲדָשׁ עַל-צִיּוֹן תֹּאִיר וְנִזְכָּה כְּלָנוּ מִהֲרָה לְאוֹרוֹ:
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ יִצְרַח הַמְּאוֹרוֹת:

To the Blessed Almighty, they offer pleasant melodies; to the King, the Almighty, [Who is] living and enduring, they utter hymns and make praises heard. For He alone is the Performer of mighty deeds, Maker of new things; Master of battles, Sower of acts of righteousness, Causer of deliverance to sprout forth; Creator of cures. Awesome in praise, Master of wonders, He renews in His goodness, each day, continuously, the work of creation, as it is said: “[Give thanks to Him] Who makes the great luminaries,” for His kindness is everlasting.” Shine a new light upon Zion, and may we all soon be privileged to [enjoy] its brightness. Blessed are You, Hashem, Former of the luminaries.

10. R. Ezra Bick, Birkot Kriat Shema – Yotzer Or: Renewal of Creation

Thus, one might claim, the Sages based this blessing on the "changing of the guard" of light and darkness, rather than on the light itself, because the renewal of nature every day is experientially more moving and more impressive, and hence more able to elicit a deep response... There is a difference between the existence of nature, static and immutable since creation, and the dynamic, ever-changing picture of nature that we experience when we awake in the morning, and that difference is the immediacy of God's presence. The blessing is not about creation per se, but about God's presence within creation, a presence we face daily. It is not God the Creator, but God the King, the Ruler, who "rolls" the darkness away and who raises up the sun and shines it upon us every day, always... When you recite the *Shema*, when you declare His majesty, it is not an affirmation of metaphysical truth, but a response to being in His majestic presence. The dynamism of nature reflects God's power, or His goodness (*be-tuvo*), or His presence, before us – and that is the experience which will lead to *kabbalat ol malkhut shamayim* (accepting the yoke of heaven) in a few minutes.

11. Ahava Rabba, Blessings Before Shema, Siddur

אַהֲבָה רַבָּה אַהֲבָתָנוּ יְקוּם אֱלֹהֵינוּ הַמְלֵא גְדוּלָה וַיִּתְּרָה חֶמְלַת עָלֵינוּ: אֲבִינוּ מְלַכְנוּ בְּעָבוֹר אַבוֹתֵינוּ
שֶׁבְטָחוּ בָּהּ וְתִלְמָדֵם חֲקֵי חַיִּים כֵּן תִּתְּנֵנוּ וְתִלְמָדֵנוּ: אֲבִינוּ הָאֵב הַרְחֵמֵן הַמְּרַחֵם רַחֵם עָלֵינוּ וְתֵן בְּלִבְנוּ
לְהִבִּין וְלִהְשָׁכִיל לְשִׁמְעַע לְלַמֵּד וְלִלְמַד לְשִׁמֵּר וְלַעֲשׂוֹת וְלִקְיָם אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי תְלִמוּד תּוֹרָתְךָ בְּאַהֲבָה:

וְהָאֵר עֵינֵינוּ בְּתוֹרָתְךָ וְדַבַּק לִבֵּנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתֶיךָ וַיַּחַד לִבֵּנוּ לְאַהֲבָה וְלִירְאָה אֶת־שְׁמֶךָ: וְלֹא נִבּוֹשׁ לְעוֹלָם
וְעַד כִּי בְשֵׁם קְדוֹשְׁךָ הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא בְּטַחְנוּ נִגְיֵלָה וְנִשְׁמָחָה בִּישׁוּעָתְךָ: וְהִבִּיאֵנוּ לְשָׁלוֹם מֵאַרְבַּע כַּנְפוֹת
הָאָרֶץ וְתוֹלִיכֵנוּ קוֹמָמִיּוֹת לְאַרְצֵנוּ: כִּי אֵל פּוֹעֵל יִשׁוּעוֹת אַתָּה וּבָנוּ בְּחַרְתָּ מִכָּל־עַם וְלִשׁוֹן. וְקִרְבָּתָנוּ
לְשְׁמֶךָ הַגָּדוֹל סְלָה בְּאַמֶּת לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ וְלִיְחֻדְךָ בְּאַהֲבָה: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְקוּק הַבּוֹחֵר בְּעַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה:

[With] unbounded love You have loved us Hashem, our God; [With] great and abundant pity have You pitied us. Our Father, our King! for the sake of our forefathers who trusted in You, and whom You taught statutes of life, so too, be gracious to us and teach us. Our Father, merciful Father, Who acts with compassion have compassion on us and put into our hearts to comprehend, and to be intellectually creative, to listen, to learn, and to teach, to preserve, to practice, and to fulfill all the words of instruction in Your Torah with love. And enlighten our eyes in Your Torah, and cause our hearts to hold fast to Your commandments, and unify our hearts to love and fear Your Name; and may we never be put to shame, for in Your holy, great, and awesome Name— have we trusted; may we exult and rejoice in Your deliverance. And bring us to peace from the four corners of the earth and lead us upright to our land. Because, You are the Almighty, Who performs acts of deliverance, and You have chosen us from among all peoples and tongues, and You have brought us close to Your great Name, forever in truth; that we may give thanks to You, and proclaim Your Oneness, with love. Blessed are You, Hashem, Who chooses His people Yisrael with love.

12. Chiddushei ha-Ramban, [Berachot 11b](#)

הַדָּבָר יָדוּעַ שֶׁאֵהֶבֶת עוֹלָם בְּרַכַּת הַמִּצְוָה הַיָּא לְקִרְיַת שְׁמַע. שְׁכַל הַמִּצְוֹת כּוֹלֵן טַעוֹנוֹת הֵן
בְּרַכָּה עוֹבֵר לַעֲשִׂייתָן. וְכֵן בַּהֲלֵל וְכֵן בַּמְגַלָּה וְכֵן בְּקִרְיַת הַתּוֹרָה...זֶהוּ שֶׁאִמְרָנוּ [בְּרַכּוֹת
יֵא: [בַּהֲשִׁיכִים אַחַר שְׁקָרָא א"צ לְבָרֵךְ שְׁכַבֵּר נַפְטָר בַּאֲהַבָּה רַבָּה. דְּבַרְכַת שְׁנוֹן תּוֹרָה
הַיֵּא...]

The matter is known that Ahavat Olam is a blessing on the *mitzvah* of the Shema. For all *mitzvot* require a blessing before they are done. And so too is the case with Megilla and Torah reading...And this is what we said ([Berachot 11b](#)): If you rose early and recited [Shema and its blessings], you no longer need to recite *birkot ha-Torah* (the blessings over learning Torah) because you have fulfilled your obligation [of *birkot ha-Torah*] with Ahava Rabba. Because it is considered a blessing on [intense] Torah learning.

13. Responsa of the Rashba, Volume 1, Siman 319

הַקּוֹרָא קִרְיַת שְׁמַע בְּלֹא בְּרַכּוֹתֶיהָ יֵצֵא... וּמִיָּהוּ מִסְתַּבְּרָא שְׁחוּזָר וְאוֹמֵר בְּרַכּוֹת וּבְפָנֵי עַצְמָן
בְּלֹא קִרְיַת שְׁמַע שְׁכַבֵּר יֵצֵא.

וְאִם עַל פִּי שְׁבַרְכּוֹת לְפָנֵי קִרְיַת שְׁמַע נִתְקַנּוּ לֹא בְּרַכּוֹת שֶׁל ק"ש כִּדִּי שֶׁתִּאֲמַר הַיָּךְ יְבָרֵךְ
שֶׁלֹּא עַל הַקִּרְיָה...שֶׁהִרִי אֵינוּ מְבָרֵךְ אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ וְצוּנוּ לְקָרָא אֶת שְׁמַע...וּלְפִיכֵךְ אִם עַל פִּי
שִׁיצָא יְדֵי קִרְיַת שְׁמַע לֹא יֵצֵא. וְחוּזָר הוּא וְקוֹרָא בְּרַכּוֹת בְּפָנֵי עַצְמָן.

14. Birkot Kriat Shema - Yotzer Or: Renewal of Creation Birkot Kriat Shema - Yotzer Or: Renewal of Creation

One who recites the Shema without its attendant blessings has fulfilled their obligation because “the blessings do not stand in the way [of the Shema]”... Nevertheless, it makes sense that [after having recited the Shema without blessings] you should go back and say the blessings by themselves, without the Shema that you have already fulfilled.

And even though these blessings have been established before the reading of the Shema, they are not blessings **of** the Shema, such that you might ask how can you recite these blessings without saying the Shema... For behold we do not say a blessing “that we have been made holy and commanded to read the Shema.” And therefore, even though you may have fulfilled your obligation to read [the Shema] you have not fulfilled the obligation to recite the blessings. And you must go back and recite the blessings on their own.

14. R. Ezra Bick, *Ahava Rabba: Love through Torah*

Ahava Rabba: Love through Torah

God is king over nature, as expressed in natural law, and God is king over Israel, as expressed in Torah law. Once again, however, this is not referring to some historical fact – the giving of the Torah at Sinai four thousand years ago – nor to the *mitzvah* to learn Torah, but to the ongoing dynamic experience of God's presence and relationship with us in the Torah. In other words, it refers to the relationship of choseness and love with God, a relationship that we experience "every day always" through the experience of Torah. The relationship with Torah **is** the love of God, experienced daily... This explains the fact that the blessing does not dwell on the giving of the Torah, but on our obligation and willingness to learn Torah...

Understanding this, we should immediately be struck by how close this blessing is woven into the fabric of the *shema*. The *shema* opens with the declaration of the kingdom of God and follows directly with the command to "love God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might." That is followed by the commands of learning Torah and placing the words of Torah as signs on our bodies and doors. The blessing is based exactly on these elements. God is king, and we are chosen to be His people. We are commanded to love Him, and He expresses His love for us eternally. The Torah is to be with us at all times, and we are given the Torah by God and yearn to learn and fulfill it. The blessing is the Divine parallel to the human commands of the *shema*.

15. Shema, Siddur

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְקֻוֹק אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְקֻוֹק אֶחָד:

Listen, Israel: Hashem is our God, Hashem is One.

16. [Sforno on Deuteronomy 6:4:1](#)

שמע ישראל התבונן והבין זה:

Shema Yisrael, listen Israel with your mind open.

17. R. Avi Weiss, *Holistic Prayer*, p.101

The more appropriate translation of the word *Shema* is “listen” rather than “hear.” There is a great difference between the two. “Hear” is superficial; the words do not penetrate. “Listen” means to integrate, to take in, to ingest the words being said. A husband and wife, for example, often hear each other but do not listen to each other. In the *Shema*, we pray that Israel “listen,” not just “hear,” as the Oneness of God is declared.

18. Ruth Messinger, Va'Etchanan

<https://ajws.org/dvar-tzedek/vaetchanan-5773/>

Parashat Va'etchanan includes the words of the *Sh'ma*—a prayer so important, that many Jews recite it twice a day. Our sages are explicit that when we recite the *Sh'ma*, we must do so with focus, with clarity, and with unity of heart and mind.

The essence of the *Sh'ma*—the imperative to really listen, to pay attention to injustice, and to mend the brokenness in our world—grounds my life with purpose. The difference between hearing and listening is paying attention, finding and living that elusive element of real connection to the “stranger”—or the other.

19. Shema, Siddur

וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל־לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל־מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל־לִבְּךָ: וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבִגְדֶיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִקְחֶךָ בְּדַרְגָּךְ וּבְשֹׂכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְקִשְׁרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל־יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וּכְתַבְתָּם עַל־מְזוּזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: וְהָיָה אִם־שָׁמַעַתְּ אֶת־מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת־יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיכֶם וּלְעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל־לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל־נַפְשְׁכֶם:

And you shall love Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words which I command you today, shall be upon your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children. And you shall discuss them when you sit in your house, and when you travel on the road, and when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for *totafot* (bands) between your eyes. And you shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gateways.

And it will be— if you vigilantly obey My commandments which I command you this day, to love Hashem your God, and serve Him with your entire hearts and with your entire souls...

20. Sifrei Deuteronomy 33

והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך, רבי אומר למה נאמר, לפי שנאמר ואהבת את ה' אלהיך בכל לבבך, איני יודע כיצד אוהבים את המקום תלמוד לומר והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך, תן הדברים האלה על לבך שמתוך כך אתה מכיר את מי שאמר והיה העולם ומדבק בדרכיו.

"And these things that I command you this day shall be upon your heart:" Rabbi said: Why is it said? From "And you shall love Hashem your G-d with all your heart," I do not know how to love the Holy One Blessed be He; it is, therefore written "And these things that I command you this day shall be upon your heart." For in this way you come to recognize the Holy One Blessed be He and to cleave to His ways.

21. R. Avi Weiss, Holistic Prayer, p.20

וְלָעֲבֹדוּ בְּכָל-לֵבָבְכֶם – *le-ovdo bekbol levavkhem* (Deuteronomy 11:13). *Le* is the prefix “to.” *Ovdo* is associated with *avoda*, work. And while *le-ovdo* is commonly viewed as a compound of *la-avod Oto*, “to serve Him,” it can also mean *la’avod Ito*, “to work with Him.” This does not undercut the standard translation of *le-ovdo bekbol levavkhem* – “to serve Him with all your heart.” Rather, it indicates that if prayer is deeply sincere, serving God can be transformed into a prayerful commitment to work with Him (*la-avod Oto* meshes with *la-avod Ito*). We do this in prayer by committing ourselves wholeheartedly (*bekbol levavkhem*) to establishing a world that follows “the way of the Lord, by doing what is just and right” (Genesis 18:19).