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The First Paragraph of Shema: A Structural Analysis

While there has been much written on the theological and halakhic importance of *Shema* as a whole, and the first of its three paragraphs (which is taken from *Devarim* 6:4–9) in particular,³⁰⁹ by analyzing the word choice, sentence-formation, imagery, ambiguity, and organizational structure of the first paragraph, this essay aims to utilize a literary approach in order to understand how the form of the first paragraph conveys its meaning.³¹⁰

Words

The initial paragraph of *Shema* contains 48 words.³¹¹ Eighteen (i.e., more than one third) end with a *kamatz*,³¹² indicative of the second-person address of verses 5–9 (“and you shall love,” “with all of your heart,” “when you sit at home,” etc.). The most commonly used words/roots are “*kol*” – “all” (3x), “*lev*” – “heart,” “*ve-hayu*” – “and they shall be,” “*bayit*” – “house,” and “*davar*” – “words/speech” (all 2x), which, taken together, emphasize the comprehensive dedication to the words of Torah that this paragraph charges the Jewish people with, as will be elaborated upon further.

Syntax

The arrangement of the words, including those constituting the first verse (6:4 – “*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad*”), is extremely dramatic, and there are a multitude of alliterations throughout verses 5–9 that provide a lyrical flow of the words. The Hebrew in verse 4 is notoriously difficult to translate, with one recent explanation offering the convincing translation of “Listen, O Israel, the Lord our God is One.”³¹³ The rest of the section includes many instances of the phenomenon known as “*lashon nofel al lashon*” (literally, “tongue falling on tongue”), including,

³⁰⁹. See, for example, “The Essence of Shema: Unity of God, Love of God, and the Study of His Law,” in Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Worship of the Heart: Essays on Jewish Prayer*, ed. Shalom Carmy (New York, NY: KTAV, 2003), 107–121; Norman Lamm, *The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1998).

³¹⁰. There are many books that serve as excellent introductions to the literary approach to *Tanakh*, including, Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1981); J. P. Fokkelman, *Reading Biblical Narrative: An Introductory Guide* (Leiderdorp, The Netherlands: Deo Publishing, 1999); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1989); Jerome T. Walsh, *Style and Structure in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2001); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1983); Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1987).

³¹¹. Excluding “*Kel Melekh Ne’eman*” and “*Barukh shem Kevod Malkhuto le-olam va-ed*” (which are not found in *Devarim* and therefore will not be discussed in this essay).

³¹². “*Ve-ahavta*,” “*Elokekha*,” “*levavekha*,” “*nafshekha*,” “*me’odekha*,” “*metzavekha*,” “*levavekha*,” “*le-vanekha*,” “*ve-dibarta*,” “*be-shivtekha*,” “*be-veitekha*,” “*u-ve-lekhtekha*,” “*u-ve-shokhbekha*,” “*u-ve-kumekha*,” “*yadekha*,” “*einekha*,” “*beitekha*,” “*u-vi-sharekha*.”

³¹³. See Judah Kraut, “Deciphering the Shema: Staircase Parallelism and the Syntax of Deuteronomy 6:4,” *Vetus Testamentum* 61 (2011): 582–602. Kraut critiques many proposed translations of the second half of verse 4, including “*Hashem* is our God, *Hashem* alone,” “*Hashem* our God, *Hashem* is one,” and “*Hashem* our God is one *Hashem*,” among others, based on linguistic and stylistic grounds. The crux of the difficulty in translating the verse is the second mention of “*Hashem*” and its role in the verse (and the fact that nowhere else in *Tanakh*, other than in one verse in *Divrei Ha-Yamim*, does the combination of “*Hashem + Elokeinu/Elokekha/Elokeikhem*” mean “*Hashem* is our/your God”). Kraut concludes that the verse is an instance of staircase parallelism, where a verse is structured in an ABAC format (in our case, A is “*Hashem*,” B is “*Elokeinu*,” A is “*Hashem*,” and C is “*echad*”), but is meant to be read as if it was ABC, as in in *Shemot* 15:3, “*Hashem ish milchamah, Hashem shemo*,” which thus should be translated as “*Hashem*, Man of War is His name” (i.e., the second mention of *Hashem* is purely poetic and is not meant to be translated). While it is beyond the scope of this essay, “*Barukh shem Kevod Malkhuto le-olam va-ed*” is also extremely difficult to translate. See Joel M. Hoffman, “What the Prayers Really Say,” *My People’s Prayer Book: The Sh’ma and Its Blessings*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2005), 91.

but by no means limited to, “*be-khol levavekha*,” “*al levavekha*,” “*ve-dibarta bam*,” and “*u-ve-lekhtekha va-derekh*.” These wordplays help the paragraph’s aural flow and are perhaps reflective of the natural ease by which the Torah’s words (the “*devarim*” mentioned in the verses) should roll off of the tongues of *Benei Yisrael*.

Imagery

The content of the first paragraph centers around three loci – the individual (from both a physical and emotional standpoint), the household, and the public sphere. The individual is charged with loving God with all his heart and soul,³¹⁴ having the words of Torah upon his heart,³¹⁵ binding a sign around his arm, and having the words of God as a symbol upon his head.³¹⁶ That individual is meant to repeat the words of Torah to his children (who are presumably in his home), and to speak of these words in his house, when he wakes up and when he goes to sleep.³¹⁷ And in the public realm, the individual is told to speak words of Torah when he walks on the way, and to inscribe them on the doorposts of both house and city.³¹⁸ The commandments of God in the first paragraph thus encompass all possible activities – thought,³¹⁹ speech,³²⁰ and action.³²¹

Ambiguity

Though it is only six verses long, the first paragraph of *Shema* contains many examples of ambiguous language. Besides the aforementioned difficulty of translating verse 4’s double mention of “*Hashem*,” the meaning of the word “*echad*” is similarly ambiguous. Some suggested translations include: “[is] one,” “the one and only,” “alone,” “unique,” “exclusively,” “on His own.”³²² It is also unclear what the verse is meant to connote – God’s being the only God that exists, God’s being the only god that Israel may worship, and/or God’s incorporeality and indivisibility.³²³

The word “*me’odekha*” is also notoriously difficult to translate, and seems to connote some variation of “strength/might,” “money/possessions,” and “very-ness.”³²⁴

Additionally, as is clear from the Rashbam’s comment on another instance of the Torah’s prescription of what *Chazal* call “*tefillin*” (in *Shemot* 13:9), it is ambiguous whether God’s commandment to bind His words as a “sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead” is meant to be taken literally³²⁵ or metaphorically.³²⁶

It is possible, at the very least on the plane of *derush*, that the ambiguities of these difficult words and phrases are meant to provide examples of the timelessness of the interpretive endeavor, in that the words of Torah can be analyzed and debated over, throughout the generations, at home and at the city gates.

³¹⁴. Verse 5.

³¹⁵. Verse 6. Prof. Jeffrey Tigay notes that the word “love” was used in Ancient Near Eastern political treaty terminology to refer to loyalty of subjects to their suzerain, and thus the “love” referred to in this verse is not purely an emotional one, but rather, is meant to connote love expressed through loyalty, i.e., the performance of God’s commandments. See *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia, PA: JPS, 1996), 77.

³¹⁶. Verse 8.

³¹⁷. Verse 7. “When you wake up and when you go to sleep” might be a merism, a literary device that lists two ends of a spectrum but is meant to include everything in-between – in our case, “every waking moment.”

³¹⁸. Verse 9. As a possible parallel to the idea of writing the words of the Torah on the city gates, Tigay notes an ancient Egyptian practice of writing instructions on the entranceways of temples. These instructions listed the moral and ritualistic prerequisites for entering the temple. See Tigay, 444.

³¹⁹. Loving God with all your heart and soul; having the words of God on your heart.

³²⁰. “*Ve-shinantam le-vanekha ve-dibarta bam*” – “and you shall repeat them to your children and you shall speak of them” (v. 7).

³²¹. “Bind them as a sign upon your hand...inscribe them on the doorposts...” (v. 8). Mrs. Susan Lieberman first brought to my attention the phenomenon of the Torah’s addressing the realms of thought, speech, and action as a unit, noting that the Ten Commandments are a chiasmic structure of thought/speech/action/speech/thought.

³²². See Kraut, 584–585; Tigay, 76; Hoffman, 91.

³²³. Ibid.

³²⁴. See Lamm, 141–145.

³²⁵. In which case *tefillin* would be a biblical commandment.

³²⁶. In which case *tefillin* would be a rabbinic commandment.

Structure

The entirety of the first paragraph of *Shema* can be broken down into groups of three:

There are three mentions of God's name in verse 4 ("*Hashem*," "*Elokeinu*," "*Hashem*").

There is a commandment to love God by way of three mechanisms: heart, soul, and might (v. 5).

The words of God are to be (1) on your heart, (2) taught to your children, and (3) spoken about, and in three contexts: (1) when you are sitting at home, (2) walking on the way, and (3) lying down and getting up.

Three actions are to be taken to keep the words of the Torah in mind at all times – binding them as a sign upon the hand, having them be a symbol between the eyes, and writing them on the doorposts of houses and gates.

Throughout *Tanakh*, the number three is often used in the context of mental contemplation and transformative thought³²⁷ – to name a few examples, Yonah was in the belly of the fish for three days, during which time he came to terms with God's commandment to him; Avraham went through the mental anguish of the journey to the *Akeidah* for three days; Esther prepared for three days to go see Achashverosh; and the Jewish people were told to prepare for three days for the Revelation at Mount Sinai. Perhaps this emphasis on units of three in the first paragraph in *Shema* is a subtle way of emphasizing the intellectual nature of the commitment every Jew is called upon to make in the *Shema*, thereby stressing that the words of the Torah are not meant to be glossed over without thinking, but rather contemplated deeply, and with dedication. By directing the entirety of one's mental faculties towards love towards God and the words of His Torah, one can demonstrate commitment to Torah in all realms – self, home, and the public square – as described in the first paragraph of the *Shema*.

Conclusion

The words, sentence-structure, imagery, and format of the first paragraph of *Shema* help convey its meaning – it is a structural unity that calls upon the individual to dedicate his or her self to God and His words, and embody what those words represent in all contexts – alone, at home, and in the public sphere. Through this comprehensive commitment, an individual can truly embody the word spelled by the large letters in *Devarim* 6:4 – the letter *ayin* in the word "*shema*," and the letter *daled* in the word "*echad*" – and be a living witness, an "*eid*," offering testimony of the one, true God.³²⁸

³²⁷. Shani Taragin brought this phenomenon to my attention.

³²⁸. Lawrence A. Hoffman, "Origins of the Liturgy," *My People's Prayer Book: The Sh'ma and Its Blessings*, ed. Lawrence A. Hoffman (Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights, 2005), 93.