

Dvar Torah - Va'etchanan

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Shabbat shalom!

My name is Morry Safer and it's my honor and humble privilege to share some words or Torah this morning for my first time at Minyan Ma'or.

This week's parasha - Va'etchanan has many familiar pieces including the 10 Commandments and many other familiar verses. Coinciding with Shabbat Nachamu and closely following the growingly-popular holiday of Tu B'Av, there are a breadth of topics available for a dvar Torah this week. Rather than try to cover it all, I'd like to be laser-focused on a single, well-known verse. But first, a little background and a little window into how my mind thinks about math and Torah

There is a familiar phrase which we find originally in Midrash Bemidbar Rabbah - יש שבעים פנים בתורה – “there are seventy faces of the Torah”. The origins of this phrase are part gematria and part Torah numerology, but usually it is meant to represent and to validate the many different voices of Torah interpretation. In traditional settings, it acknowledges the existence of alternate or minority opinions. In modern, pluralistic settings, it often justifies the inclusion of many voices who were traditionally excluded. In either case, יש שבעים פנים בתורה is an abstract concept trying to encompass the vastness of our Oral tradition.

Early during the pandemic, when face-to-face Torah study was especially difficult to come by, I began to wonder what it might be like to take this idea of “70 faces” literally. At a macro level, this isn't such a foreign concept in Judaism. The same numerology that gets us 70 faces of Torah, also gets us the concept of a lifetime defined as 70 years, and with it, the celebration of a second B-Mitzvah at the age

of 83. So anyone who studies Parashat Hashavua and celebrates a second B-Mitzvah will, by some definition, encounter **שבעים פנים בתורה**. But, at a micro level, I wondered what it would be like to dive deeply into a single verse and try to pull out 70 or more different learnings. Modern tools such as Sefaria and Google make this accessible in ways not easily available to previous generations. But where to start for such an experiment? Ironically, the midrash of **שבעים פנים** is derived from the rather uninspiring verses in Parashat Naso where the chieftain of each of the twelve tribes brings exactly the same offering repeatedly. This is a part of the Torah that rarely gets inspirationally interpreted, and even less often is any one chieftain singled out for interpretation uniquely - let alone interpreted uniquely 70 different ways! So I planned to look elsewhere...

As a trial, it made sense to me to start with a verse of the Torah which is much more accessible. I decided to start investigating the verse in this week's Parasha - Dvarim, Chapter 6, Verse 4, as a proving ground to see if this method of study could be fruitful and engaging. I hoped that this verse, which we know more commonly as "The Shema", would provide an appropriate volume of different interpretations. As part of our tefilot, I expected many different comments on the Shema across sidurim and machzorim. Discussion of the times for saying the Shema – **מֵאִימְתֵי קוֹרֵין אֶת שְׁמַע** - famously opens the rabbinic discussion in the Mishnah and Talmud. The Talmud also suggests the Shema as an incantation for keeping evil spirits at bay. The familiar tune of the Shema is part of childrens bedtime routines and its concise and fundamental message concludes the Vidui to be recited when death is imminent. Clearly, there would be a lot of material to consider.

As I began collecting my favorite Shema teachings, I imagined a future learning session, perhaps in the early morning of a Tikkun Leil Shavuot - SpeedTorah presented Cyrano de Bergerac-style with "70 different sources presented in less than an hour". Some may resonate, others would not, but hopefully there might

be something new for everyone. And as the deadline for this past year's Tikkun quickly approached, I considered and then shelved this concept for another year. Or so I thought. "*Mann Tracht, Un Gott Lacht*" – I delayed my plans too long and G-d laughed! For I spent the first break-out session of this year's tikkun, still early in the evening, hearing Dr. Irle Goldman use the Shema as a framework for psychotherapy. And I concluded the tikkun in the early morning listening to Rabbi Alan Lehman teach the rules of early morning davening with the Mishnaic discussion of the Shema as a source. It may have been the lack of sleep, but I can take a Divine hint! Seventy faces of the Shema it would be!

Of the many Shema teachings I've collected, some I find interesting, but I'm not quite sure what they add to our tradition. For example, there is a currently popular claim that the Shema is the oldest-known written Haiku. If this is your first time hearing this, you are probably quietly counting syllables.

Shema Yisrael (5)

Adonai Eloheinu (7)

Adonai Echad (5)

Still others are good for nothing more than a chuckle, such as the suggestion that a Kosher Greek sandwich shop be named "Gyro Israel".

I promise not to drag you through 68 more this morning, but with the few moments I have remaining, I'd like to focus on two interpretations of the Shema which were both less familiar and also personally inspirational.

First, a Kabbalistic approach. The kabbalists famously found meaning in every letter and every sound of the Torah. So, thusly inspired, and in what may certainly be a darshan "rookie mistake", I ask you, if you are willing, to close your eyes briefly and focus on the letters of the Shema through this guided meditation.

We begin with a Shin, vocalized with a shva – Shhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh
Thus we silence the noises of the outside and focus inward.
With the continuing hush, we quiet our breathing, ready for transition.

Next, the Mem, bringing our lips together in a hum - Mmmmmmmmmmm
As science teaches, the universe was created with a hum.
From this Mem, all things are possible.

Adding the vowel Patach, we get - Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
This is the primordial syllable of human speech, beginning our capability to
communicate.
From here, our thoughts can be vocalized and materialized as actions.
And through these communications and actions, we are in control of our
outcomes.

And finally, we conclude with an Ayin - an unvocalized pause.
We catch our breath, knowing we are centered and in control.
For it is this brief moment of silence that allows us to begin anew.

Shin-shva - Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.
Mem-Patach - Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa
Ayin

Shin-shva - Shhhhhhhhhhhhh.
Mem-Patach - Maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.
Ayin

If you are still with me, please slowly open your eyes. I hope in this short demonstration, you can feel the relaxing and calming power of the Shema - Judaism's oldest meditation, profound in its simplicity.

For a final, alternate interpretation, I'd like to focus on an interesting translation and parsing of the Shema. The word "Shema", traditionally rendered as "Hear", can be viewed as an attention-grabbing interjection. "Hey! Listen!" "Yisrael" is traditionally translated as a proper noun. However, Rabbi Arthur Waskow of the Jewish Renewal movement has suggested instead a common-noun translation. Rather than "Yisrael" the named people, we recall the origin of the name Yisrael from the story of Jacob wrestling with the angelic representative of Hashem. "Shema Yisrael" thus becomes "Listen up, all you G-d-wrestlers!" In this way, the Shema is a call to action to all those who struggle with the realities of the world. The only indisputable, uncorrectable truth is Echat – the one-ness of G-d. Everything else is on the table for questioning and fixing - *L'taken Olam b'Malchut Shadai* - to repair the world within the Dominion of the Divine.

I'm sure many of you are already familiar with the famous teaching of the Chassidic master, Rabbi Simcha Bunim of Peshischa that instructs that we should carry two pieces of paper in our pockets. In one pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "I am only dust and ashes" to humble us when we are too proud. In the other pocket should be a piece of paper saying: "For my sake was the world created" to build us back up when we are broken. I respectfully submit that Rabbi Simcha is both 3000 years too late and twice as inefficient as Parashat Va'Etchanan. For this week's parasha teaches us:

בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ,

When you are sitting at home, comfortably and numbly protected from the chaos and injustice of the outside world - "Shema Yisrael" – Don't just sit there! It's Wrestling Time!

וּבְלִכְתּוֹךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ

When you are out on your way, overwhelmed, road-raged and enraged by your interactions in the day-to-day, worried you may do something you'll later regret - "Shema Yisrael" - Quiet. Recenter. Pause.

וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ

When you lie awake in bed, mind racing, unable to dismiss the stresses of the recently-passed hours - "Shema Yisrael" - Shhhhhhhhh, Maaaaaaaaa, .

וּבְקוּמְךָ

And when you wake in the morning to an alarm that seems way too early, and you lack the energy or desire to get out of bed - "Shema Yisrael" – LET'S GET READY TO RUMBLE!!!!

וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם

And so we speak the words of the Shema at least twice a day, encompassing the duality of these two interpretations as well as those of many, many other commentaries, teachings, and elucidations which constitute the "Shivim Panim shel Torah". Literally or figuratively, may we continue to increasingly count our understandings of Torah and its applications to our prayers, our inter-personal responsibilities, and our engaged world view. And may the words of the Shema simultaneously provide comfort to us on this Shabbat Nachamu while also serving as a call to action as we begin our 7 week ascent to the beginning of the new year.

Shabbat Shalom.