



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

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### Shabbat Nahamu/Shabbat Parashat Va'et-hannan July 28, 2018 - 16 Av 5778



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### Say it Loud, Say it Proud

Torah Reading: [Deuteronomy 3:23 - 7:11](#)

Haftarah Reading: [Isaiah 40:1-26](#)

I was 14 or 15 years old (in 10th grade), I was studying Talmud for the first time as a student in the Prozdor program, and I did NOT get it. Or at least, it didn't speak to me, and I didn't think it was something I'd return to once the school year was over.

Little did I know.

Or maybe some hidden part of my neshama, my soul, DID know that one day, when I was ready, I would fall, and fall hard, for Talmud and rabbinic literature, so much so that I would eventually make a career of studying and teaching it. And maybe one sign that I did know in some subconscious way is that I did not get rid of the volume I studied from that year. It sat in my parents' home for a number of years, until finally, as a rabbi and a doctoral student at JTS, I finally retrieved it and put it on the shelves of my own home.

So why am I recalling this for you today? Because there's a link between what I studied that year, and this week's parashah, Va-Ethanan. The material we learned was not much, only about a page and a half – but it was from the Tractate Berakhot, and it was about the obligation to recite the Shema – which appears in

Deut. 6:4, followed by the paragraph traditionally known as “the V’Ahavta” (vv. 5-9), as part of this week’s Torah reading. The Shema is a crucial part of the morning and evening services with which we start and end our days. It is a statement of the most fundamental theological principle in a religion that otherwise typically de-emphasizes systematic theological statements. God is the sole and unified Divinity in the universe, and God is our God as the People of Israel. And so I found myself returning to that small Talmudic snippet to see what it could teach me not quite forty years later – for even Torah we have already learned once, or twice, or multiple times, can have new things to teach us.

One of the pieces I find myself drawn to in this moment is a mishnah on 15a and the short discussion thereto. The underlying question of the mishnah is about a detail of how we are to recite the Shema. Ideally, it should be said aloud. But what if one said it quietly, so quietly that one did not even oneself hear what was said? Rabbi Yose says that the religious obligation has not been adequately fulfilled; Rabbi Yehudah says that it has. The talmudic commentary thus asks how each rabbi has come to his position:

*What is Rabbi Yose’s reasoning? Because it is written “Hear” – (this means) you must make audible (hearable) to your ears (the words) you bring forth from your mouth.*

*Whereas the other teacher (Rabbi Yehudah) holds that “Hear” (means) in any language which you comprehend.*

*(Actually) Rabbi Yose derives both (rules) from it.*

The discussion hinges on the Hebrew root shin, mem, ayin, which has multiple, inter-related meanings. The most basic of these is “hear,” but it can also connote understanding and learning (indeed, the phrase I have translated above as “derives...from it” is “shema mina” in the original). Which of these is intended here?

There is a good argument to be made for either “Hear” or “Understand.” As I’ve already stated, the Shema is about as basic and fundamental a statement of Jewish belief as there is. In a discussion on the previous page (14b), which my class also learned that long-ago year, the Talmud discusses the order of the paragraphs we say in the Shema (which in addition to Deut. 6:4-9 includes Deut. 11:13:21 and Num. 15:37-41), and why we say them in the order we do. One answer is that we must first accept – actively and vocally – God’s sovereignty over us (recite Deut. 6:4), and only then can we turn to the commandments that are described in the following three paragraphs, such as teaching our children, putting mezuzot on our doorposts, wearing tefillin, and having tzitzit on the corners of our garments. The Shema is our statement of that acceptance.

Thus, it makes sense that if this is what we really and truly believe, indeed if this is the foundation of our belief system and way of life more generally, then we should be willing, and obligated, to say so out loud, such that we – and others – can hear ourselves say it. It also makes sense that if this is what we really and truly believe, indeed if this is the foundation of our belief system and way of life more generally, then we need to fully know and understand what we are saying, including being permitted to say the Shema in our native language even if that is not Hebrew.

And why does this seem so significant to me now? I can’t speak for anyone else, but I highly doubt that I am alone in the feeling that this is a historical moment that especially calls on us to know who we are and what we believe, what guides us, and how we decide to act in the world. “Shema” – you can know that you genuinely believe something if you feel willing and obligated to speak it loudly enough that it can be heard, that you can hear yourself say it. “Shema” – you can’t be sure you genuinely believe something if you are saying it in words you don’t truly understand.

Ultimately, the halakhah, Jewish law, was decided in favor of Rabbi Yehudah: although one

should ideally say the Shema out loud, after the fact one has still fulfilled the obligation even if it was not said audibly (the point of agreement that Shema may be said in any language is also accepted halakhah). But I'm carrying Rabbi Yose's point with me too as I go into this Shabbat, and from there into whatever wild new events the coming week will bring, when we will no doubt be called on to speak our truths and our most fundamental beliefs both audibly and clearly.

Shabbat shalom!

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**Rabbi Gail Labovitz, PhD**, is Professor of Rabbinic Literature and former Chair of the Department of Rabbinics for the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies. She also enjoys serving as the Ziegler School's faculty advisor for "InterSem," a dialogue program for students training for religious leadership at Jewish and Christian seminaries around the Los Angeles area. Dr. Labovitz formerly taught at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America (JTS) and the Academy for Jewish Religion in New York. Prior to joining the faculty at AJU, Dr. Labovitz worked as the Senior Research Analyst in Judaism for the Feminist Sexual Ethics Project at Brandeis University, and as the Coordinator for the Jewish Women's Research Group, a project of the Women's Studies Program at JTS. Rabbi Labovitz is also preparing a teshuva (rabbinic responsum) for consideration by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly on whether a person who is unable to fast for medical reasons may nonetheless serve as a leader of communal prayer on Yom Kippur.

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