

The broad and profound meaning of the verse -

שמע ישראל ה' אלוקינו ה' אחד

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God; the Lord is one”

Most of us are familiar with the verse *Shema yisrael* from a young age, and often our interpretation of it remains at a level close to that at which we first understood it. On its surface, the verse is clear and simple, however, through deep study, one may discover that its meaning goes far beyond that which was understood at first glance.

It is accepted that the verse *Shema yisrael* establishes that God is one. However, for the purpose of conveying this message, it would have sufficed to say:

“Hear, O Israel: the Lord (our God the Lord) is one”

What do the words “our God the Lord” add to our understanding of the message that God is one?

Before answering this question we should note that these added words have been interpreted by the Christians (who believe in multiple divine personalities) as proof of their erroneous beliefs. Maimonides wrote about this in the beginning of his “Essay on Resurrection”:

When the chief of the prophets wished by order of God to teach us that **He is One, without associates**, and to remove from our hearts those wrong doctrines that the Dualists propound, he proclaimed this fundamental: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One [*Deut.* 6:4]. **But the Christians utilized this verse to prove that God is one of three**, teaching that **Lord, our God, the Lord** makes three names, all followed by One, which indicates that the three are one. Far be God from what they say in their ignorance.

And thus, could it be that not only are the words “our God the Lord” unnecessary, but that because of them there is, perhaps, room to interpret the verse as stating the opposite of its true meaning? No! These two words have significance, and are essential to the understanding of the meaning of the verse. Only those who **WANT** to misunderstand the verse will do so!

I would like to demonstrate that the verse *Shema yisrael* tells us not only of the oneness of God, but also provides prophetic-historic proof of this fact. The words *elokeinu hashem*, “our God the Lord,” are an essential component of the proof. How?

Near the end of his “Essay on Resurrection,” Maimonides writes about the significance of our national history for the proof of the existence of the Creator, and his providence. Since Maimonides wrote the text in Arabic, I am supplying an English translation:

This too is a great benefit **as obedience will make their situation in this world prosper and disobedience will hurt it.** The Torah affirms it as a **continuous miracle over the generations**, that is, success in their activities if they obey God, and failure if they disobey. It is written: They shall serve as signs and proofs against you and your offspring for all time (*Deuteronomy 28, 46*). This is the basis of the rabbinic declaration, “Israel has no star,” meaning that their success and failure are not the result of natural causes or customary existence, but are linked to their obedience and disobedience. **This is the most convincing sign.**

Maimonides asserts here that chance is not involved in the history of the Jewish people, but rather, that the state of the nation is linked, with amazing precision, to their fulfilling the will of God, or their rebellion against His will, and that, “This is the most convincing sign.”

And, indeed, if we review the history of our people, a remarkable connection between the state of the nation and its actions becomes apparent. In the Torah we were warned numerous times to follow the ways of God, and not to wander astray. Further, we were promised that if we follow the ways of God, we will be rewarded, but if we stray from the ways of God, great misfortune will befall us, as is detailed in the Torah portions *Behukotai* and *Ki Tavo*. When we recite the second paragraph of the *Shema*, we repeat the promise of reward if we follow God’s commandments, and the warning of loss if we stray from them:

And it shall come to pass, **if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments** which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to **serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul**, that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil. And I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou **shalt eat and be satisfied. Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and ye turn aside**, and serve other gods, and worship them; and the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the

ground shall not yield her fruit; **and ye perish quickly from off the good land which the Lord giveth you.** (*Deuteronomy 11:13-17*)

In the portion *Ha-azinu* God warns us:

Now therefore write ye this song for you, and teach thou it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, **that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel.** For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore unto their fathers, flowing with milk and honey; **and they shall have eaten their fill, and waxen fat; and turned unto other gods, and served them, and despised Me, and broken My covenant; then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed...** (*Deuteronomy 31:19-21*)

Joshua, in Chapter 23, verses 14-16, emphasizes, before his death, that all the good that God promised to Israel came to be, and he warns that in the same way God will bring all the misfortune upon them if they stray from His path:

And, behold, this day I am going the way of all the earth; consider ye therefore **in all your heart and in all your soul, that not one thing hath failed of all the good things** which the Lord your God spoke concerning you; all are come to pass unto you, **not one thing hath failed thereof. And it shall come to pass, that as all the good things are come upon you of which the Lord your God spoke unto you, so shall the Lord bring upon you all the evil things, until He have destroyed you** from off this good land which the Lord your God hath given you. When ye transgress the covenant of the Lord your God, which He commanded you, and go and serve other gods, and worship them; then shall the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, **and ye shall perish quickly from off the good land** which He hath given unto you.

It is important to note that this passage from Joshua is strikingly similar to the second paragraph of the *Shema*, both in content, and in style.

Some four hundred years after Joshua, when Solomon blessed the entire congregation of Israel after the completion of the construction of the Temple, he affirms similarly:

Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto His people Israel, according to all that He promised; **there hath not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised by the hand of Moses His servant.** (*1 Kings 8:56*)

About a thousand years after the giving of the Torah and Joshua's testament, Ezra confirms that when we abandoned the ways of God, terrible things befell us, as the Torah and Joshua warned.

And I said: 'O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to Thee, my God; **for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our guiltiness is grown up unto the heavens. Since the days of our fathers we have been exceeding guilty unto this day; and for our iniquities have we, our kings, and our priests, been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, and to spoiling, and to confusion of face, as it is this day.'** (*Ezra 9: 6-7*)

In Chapter 9, Nehemia reviews the history of our nation from the times of Abraham until his time. It stands out, as Maimonides wrote, that **"the good that is bestowed upon Israel or the bad that befalls them are not accidental, but rather depend upon their obedience or disobedience of God's will."** It is appropriate to read this wonderful chapter on the topic, and here is a selection of verses from it:

Thou art the Lord the God, who didst choose Abram, and broughtest him forth out of Ur of the Chaldees, and gavest him the name of Abraham; and foundest his heart faithful before Thee, **and madest a covenant with him to give the land of the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Jebusite, and the Girgashite, even to give it unto his seed, and hast performed Thy words; for Thou art righteous.** And Thou sawest the affliction of our fathers in Egypt, and heardest their cry by the Red Sea; and didst show signs and wonders upon Pharaoh, and on all his servants, and on all the people of his land; for Thou knewest that they dealt proudly against them; and didst get Thee a name, as it is this day. And Thou didst divide the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on the dry land; and their pursuers Thou didst cast into the depths, as a stone into the mighty waters. Moreover in a pillar of cloud Thou didst lead them by day; and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light in the way wherein they should go. Thou camest down also upon mount Sinai, and spakest with them from

heaven, and gavest them right ordinances and laws of truth, good statutes and commandments; and madest known unto them Thy holy sabbath, and didst command them commandments, and statutes, and a law, by the hand of Moses Thy servant; and gavest them bread from heaven for their hunger, and broughtest forth water for them out of the rock for their thirst, **and didst command them that they should go in to possess the land which Thou hadst lifted up Thy hand to give them. ... Moreover Thou gavest them kingdoms and peoples, which Thou didst allot quarter by quarter;** so they possessed the land of Sihon, even the land of the king of Heshbon, and the land of Og king of Bashan. Their children also didst Thou multiply as the stars of heaven, **and didst bring them into the land, concerning which Thou didst say to their fathers, that they should go in to possess it.** So the children went in and possessed the land, and Thou didst subdue before them the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites, and gavest them into their hands, with their kings, and the peoples of the land, that they might do with them as they would. And they took fortified cities, and a fat land, **and possessed houses full of all good things, cisterns hewn out, vineyards, and oliveyards, and fruit-trees in abundance; so they did eat, and were filled, and became fat, and luxuriated in Thy great goodness. Nevertheless they were disobedient, and rebelled against Thee, and cast Thy law behind their back,** and slew Thy prophets that did forewarn them to turn them back unto Thee, and they wrought great provocations. **Therefore Thou didst deliver them into the hand of their adversaries, who distressed them;** and in the time of their trouble, when they cried unto Thee, Thou heardest from heaven; and according to Thy manifold mercies **Thou gavest them saviours who might save them out of the hand of their adversaries. But after they had rest, they did evil again before Thee; therefore didst Thou leave them in the hand of their enemies,** so that they had the dominion over them; **yet when they returned, and cried unto Thee, many times didst Thou hear from heaven, and deliver them according to Thy mercies;** and didst forewarn them, that Thou mightest bring them back unto Thy law; yet they dealt proudly, and hearkened not unto Thy commandments, but sinned against Thine ordinances, which if a man do, he shall live by them, and presented a stubborn shoulder, and hardened their neck, and would not hear. ... Howbeit Thou art just in all that is come upon us; for Thou hast dealt truly, but we have done wickedly; ... **Behold, we are servants this day, and as for the land that Thou gavest unto our fathers to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof, behold, we are servants in it.**

“All good things” came to us, and when we strayed from God, “all bad things” befell us as well. As explained above, Maimonides sees the “most convincing sign” in the outstanding precision with which good and bad is meted out in accordance with our following the path of God or straying from it. What does he mean? It seems to me that Maimonides’ idea is supported in the meaning of God’s name. Let us examine the text:

And God spoke unto Moses, and said unto him: 'I am the Lord; and I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name Y-H-W-H(Lord) I made Me not known to them.' (*Exodus* 6: 2-3)

Rashi explains the name Y-H-W-H (translated as Lord):

And through my name, Y-H-W-H, I did not become known to them--- “I did not inform them” is not written here, but rather, I did not make myself known; I was not recognized by them **in my aspect of truth**, because of which I am named **Y-H-W-H, which implies I am faithful to uphold my word**, for I promised them, but I have not yet fulfilled my promise.

What is the connection between the name Y-H-W-H and His being “faithful to uphold [His] word”? Only He who was, is, and forever will be can realize all His promises without the constraints of time, as it is written in Psalm 146:

Put not your trust in princes, nor in the son of man, in whom there is no help. His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help, whose hope is in the Lord (Y-H-W-H) his God: who made heaven, and earth, the sea, and all that is in them: who keeps truth forever... The Lord (Y-H-W-H) shall reign forever, thy God, O Zion, to all generations. Hallelujah!

And, indeed, this is the meaning of the name Y-H-W-H, how? Moses asked by what name he should present God before the Children of Israel:

And Moses said unto God: 'Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them: The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me: **What is His name?** what shall I say unto them?

And God said unto Moses: '**EHEYEH ASHER EHEYEH**'; and He said: 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: I AM hath sent me unto you. And God said moreover unto Moses: 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel: **The Lord (Y-H-W-H)**, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you; this is My name for ever, and **this is My memorial unto all generations.**' (*Exodus* 3: 13-15)

What is the meaning of 'EHEYEH ASHER EHEYEH'(literally "I will be, what I will be)?

In Hebrew, the future tense serves as the past progressive, or as a repeating action in the past, as well as future. There are many examples of this, I will provide three:

1. In *Numbers* 11; 5, it is written: "We remember the fish, which we were wont to eat [literally "will eat"] in Egypt for nought..." That is to say, we remembered the fish that we **used to** eat; a repeating action in the past.
2. In *Job* 1;5, it is written: "...Thus did Job [literally "Job will do"] continually." In other words, thus Job **would do**; a repeating action in the past.
3. And a good example of the use of the future as past is *Chronicles* 2;7;21:

And this house, which is (*yihyeh*--literally "that will be") so high, every one that passeth by it shall be astonished, and shall say: Why hath the Lord done thus unto this land, and to this house?

The meaning of *yihyeh*, in this verse, is "**THAT WAS**," and, indeed, it is written explicitly in the parallel verse in *Kings* 1: 9;7:

And this house which is (*asher haya*--literally "that was") so high shall become desolate, and every one that passeth by it shall be astonished, and shall hiss; and when they shall say: Why hath the Lord done thus unto this land, and to this house?

We see that the meaning of the word EHEYEH (I will be) is **also** *asher haya* (that was), and from here we learn that the meaning of "EHEYEH ASHER EHEYEH" is: **I will be** (EHEYEH) in the future as **I was** (*hayiti*) in the past.

A side note: The present does not really exist in time and space; it is an infinitesimal concept. The transition from future to past is an instantaneous one.

In his *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah*, Maimonides explains that the power of the creator has no limit, and concludes that, therefore, He is incorporeal, and, hence, He is necessarily One, and there is no other:

If there were plural deities, these would be physical bodies; because entities, that can be enumerated and are equal in their essence, are only distinguishable from each other by the accidents that happen to physical bodies. **If the Creator were a physical body, He would have bounds and limits**, for it is impossible for a physical body to be without limits; **and where a body is limited and finite its energy is also limited and finite. And our God, blessed be his Name, since His power is infinite and unceasing--** for the [Celestial] Sphere is continually revolving--His power is not the energy of a physical body. And since He is not a physical body, the accidents that happen to physical bodies do not apply to Him, so as to distinguish Him from another being. **Hence, it is impossible that He be anything but one.** To realize this truth is an affirmative precept, as it is said "**The Lord our God; the Lord is one.**" (*Deuteronomy* 6:4)

Maimonides' explanation that the unity of the Creator is necessarily a consequence of the fact that the **power of the Creator of the Universe has no end, and therefore his power is not a bodily power, and that this teaches us that there cannot be but one**, is not easy to understand. I will try to explain the matter in a simple, contemporary manner:

God proves that He is, was, and forever will be, by his precise fulfillment of His promises, for He has realized His promises in every generation, according to His will, unhindered. It follows that He is not bounded in time and that his power is infinite. Therefore, says Maimonides: **one whose power is infinite cannot be corporeal, for every body has a limit, and the power of one whose body has a limit is necessarily finite.** Since He is not corporeal, he is not limited as are physical bodies. A power that is unbounded and limitless, **must only be one**, for were there more than one there would have to be a boundary between them. This is an abstract unity, unique, indivisible, which is unlike the uniqueness of something of which there are two. It is beyond our comprehension to fully understand this; rather, each individual comprehends according to his or her efforts and abilities.

In the introduction and first chapters of the second part of the *Guide for the Perplexed* there is an in-depth discussion proving the existence of and the unity of the Creator.

My teacher, Mr. Joseph Segal, *zt"l*, who helped to draw me closer to God, emphasized the deep meaning and importance of recognizing one single Creator who was, is, and will forever be, that is mentioned in *Isaiah* 43:8-12 and 44:8:

The blind people that have eyes shall be brought forth, and the deaf that have ears. All the nations are gathered together, and the peoples are assembled; **who among them can declare this, and announce to us former things? Let them bring their witnesses, that they may be justified; and let them hear, and say: 'It is truth.' Ye are My witnesses**, saith the Lord, and My servant whom I have chosen; **that ye may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He** (present); **before Me there was no God formed** (past), **neither shall any be after Me** (future). I, even I, am the Lord; and beside Me there is no saviour. **I have declared, and I have saved, and I have announced, and there was no strange god among you; therefore ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, and I am God.**

Fear ye not, neither be afraid; **have I not announced unto thee of old, and declared it? And ye are My witnesses.** Is there a God beside Me? Yea, there is no Rock; I know not any.

What is the testimony that we bear to God? We attest to the fact that all God's promises and warnings have been actualized in us. This is Maimonides' idea in his "Essay on Resurrection," as mentioned above, and it is based upon the meaning of the name Y-H-W-H, as God explained to Moses in Egypt. *Isaiah* expands on this notion. Let us return to his words:

I, even I, am the Lord; and beside Me there is no saviour. I have declared, and I have saved, and I have announced, and there was no strange god among you; therefore ye are My witnesses, saith the Lord, and I am God.

That is to say:

I am the Lord; I was, am, and forever will be, **and beside Me there is no saviour,** Where do we learn this? **For I have** declared, and I have saved, and **I have fulfilled,** and I have announced, and there was no strange god among you, that is to say, I, and not a strange god, and you, the nation of Israel, **therefore ye are My witnesses,** that all that I have said will be

fulfilled in you, **and all of this so that you should believe Me, and understand that I am God**, and that there is no other who promised and fulfilled his promises.

And as we read in Chapter 44 of *Isaiah*:

...have I not announced unto thee of old, and declared it? And ye are My witnesses;

In light of all that's been said, the connection between the meaning of Y-H-W-H and the name "EHEYEH ASHER EHEYEH," He who faithfully fulfills his promises, becomes clear, as does Maimonides' statement that the fulfillment of God's promises in us is "the most convincing sign" that Y-H-W-H was, is, and forever will be One.

Recent history, according to Maimonides, is "the most convincing sign" **indicating the existence of an omnipotent, and therefore singular, Creator**. And this is the meaning of the "extra" words "**our God the Lord**" in the verse *Shema yisrael*; "Hear O Israel."

We find that the words "our God the Lord" have deep meaning; they are not extraneous, rather, **from them it is proven that God is One**.

And let us note that Maimonides, in *Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* 1:6, writes on the topic of recognizing the oneness of God:

Hence, it is impossible that He be anything but one. To realize this truth is an affirmative precept, **as it is said "The Lord our God; the Lord is one."**
(*Deuteronomy* 6:4)

And it would seem sufficient for Maimonides to quote only the words "**God is One**"! However, it seems that Maimonides also reasons that **the knowledge** that God is One stems from his being "**the Lord our God**" as explained above.

Let us place the words "**The Lord, our God**" in the context of the meaning we have learned:

Hear O Israel [know, accept, and understand that-] **Y-H-W-H is our God** [He has proven this by fulfilling his promises through us with **outstanding** precision, and from this we learn that He is] **Y-H-W-H** [was, is, and forever will be, and **His power to fulfill His promises is limitless**, and, therefore, He] is [**necessarily**] **One**.

In conclusion: The history of the Jewish people, according to Maimonides, is the “most convincing sign” that:

[There exists] a Creator of the universe, He is our God, who faithfully keeps his promises, He is the only Creator, there was no god, and there will be none after Him, and there exists nothing without Him.