

# The Most Important Verse in Torah<sup>1</sup>

What is the most important verse in the Torah? Such was the question asked by Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, the redactor of the Mishnah. Three rabbis' responses are recorded. Shimon Ben Zoma said that it is <sup>2</sup>שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד ("Hear O Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem alone." A great choice, right? The ultimate declaration of faith. Shimon Ben Nanus disagreed and said that it is וואהבת לרעך כמוך; love your neighbor as yourself.<sup>3</sup> Also an excellent choice. Shimon Ben Pazi said that it is את הכבש אחד תעשה בבוקר ואת הכבש השני תעשה בין הערבים; offer the first lamb in the morning and the second lamb in the afternoon,<sup>4</sup> a verse which we read on Rosh Hodesh. That would not have been my first choice, yet Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi said that is the most important verse and that the Halacha is according to Ben Pazzi. He comments that you

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Rabbi Jordan Bendat-Appell from the Institute for Jewish Spirituality for this teaching.

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus 19:14

<sup>4</sup> Numbers 28:4

get to loving G-d through loving your neighbor and you get to loving your neighbor through being present always, תמיד.<sup>5</sup>

I have not seen a related rabbinic argument about the most important passage in the liturgy, but if there were one I would choose a lesser-known passage: המחדש בטובו בכל יום תמיד מעשה בראשית, G-d who renews in his goodness each day the works of creation. Why choose this over the Shema or the Amidah? Because the way you get to appreciate G-d and have a relationship with The Almighty is through recognizing that He renews the acts of creation each and every day. When we take things for granted, we lose appreciation of The Divine. However, when we see the impact G-d has in acts of daily living, then the very act of being alive is infused with meaning each moment of every day. We can add to this ועל נסיד שבכל-יום עמנו, the miracles which are with us every day. What new opportunities are opening up to us today?

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<sup>5</sup> Preface to Ein Yaakov, הקדמת הרב יעקב בן חביב Ben Zoma said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole [of the Torah]: "Listen O Israel, YHVH is our God, YHVH is One (Deut 6:4)".' Ben Nanus said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole [of the Torah]: "You will love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).' Ben Pazi said: 'I have found a verse that contains the whole [of the Torah]: "You will sacrifice a lamb in the morning and another at dusk (Exod. 29:39, Num. 28:4, )'.' And Rabbi (Yehudah HaNasi), their teacher, stood up and decided 'The law is according to Ben Pazi.'

Why teach this on Passover? Passover is a holiday during which things can feel very repetitious. Tonight we will gather for our Second Seder, reciting 99% of the same liturgy in the Haggadah that we said last evening. We also have eight days of matzah and by the end, many are tired of it and looking for something new to eat. No wonder our ancestors complained about the coriander-seed tasting manna<sup>6</sup> that they consumed day in and day out! At the same time, through being mindful that G-d renews creation on a daily basis, we recognize that each and every moment is new. When we are mindful about the food we are consuming, chewing it carefully and thoughtfully, each bite is infused with new excitement. When we focus on a different word or concept in our liturgy or look at it in a new light, it infuses new meaning for us.

We have an opportunity tonight at Second Seder to try to do things differently than we did last night. When we say the words *מה נשתנה הלילה הזה מכל הלילות*, how is this night different from all others? let us also keep in mind how is this Seder different than last night's. Perhaps we can add something new to the Seder, whether a new melody,

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<sup>6</sup> See Exodus 16:31 and Numbers 11:7

interpretation or section of focus in our Haggadah. Similarly, let us not see Passover as anti-climactic (as I often do), all downhill after the Seder; rather may we see each moment of every day as having infinite value, enabling us to look at things differently than we did before. In so doing, may we have a meaningful זמן חרותנו (festival of freedom), feeling that we are free to approach life with a new vitality and spirit, rather than just doing everything the same old way for the sake of tradition.