



PhiloTorah D'var Torah

A different SH'MA

SH'MA is spelled SHIN-MEM-AYIN. Aside from SH'MA referring to the SH'MA that we say in Shacharit and Arvit every day, there are other meanings to the acronym SH'MA.

One of them is SHACHARIT, MINCHA, and ARVIT. They are not the topic of this PTDT. Neither is the SH'MA we recite (at least) twice daily. There is a different meaning for the SH'MA acronym which we will get to towards the end of this PTDT.

Among other topics in this week's sedra, Moshe Rabeinu seems to be anxious and insistent about warning the people about Avoda Zara (idolatry). Specifically, he says to the people (and all of us, as well) that during Revelation at Sinai, we had heard G-d's voice but had not seen any image of him. I would add that as human beings, we have a difficult time dealing with the Invisible, Intangible characteristics of HaShem. So be very careful not to worship images of any sort. It seems that it is a temptation to do so, not necessarily to replace G-d but even to give oneself a physical focus for worship.

Then he adds (4:19) - And lest you lift up your eyes to heaven, and see the

Sun, and the Moon, and the stars, all the host of heaven, which HaShem your G-d assigned to all peoples under the entire heaven, and be drawn away to prostrate yourselves before them and worship them.

With the warning against venerating the heavenly bodies, perhaps one would think that looking at the sky and studying the heavenly bodies might not be a good idea.

Comes the Navi Yishayahu in this week's haftara and says (40:26) -

S'U MAROM EINEICHEM - Lift up your eyes on high and see, who created these, who takes out their host by number; all of them He calls by name; because of His great might and because He is strong in power, no one is missing.

Pondering the heavenly bodies, studying them and nature in general - can be a way of getting to know the Creator better and appreciate all that He did and does for us.

I would like to add another warning to that of Moshe's concerning pondering the heavenly bodies or any other aspect of nature.

Moshe's fear was that people might come to worship this or that element of nature. Mine is that people will look at nature and consider it as having nothing to do with G-d. Science is science. Nature is nature. And Torah

is something else entirely. Science and nature are physical things in this world. G-d is in the spiritual and religious world. Don't mix the two.

WRONG. Oh, so wrong. I have to be careful here not to go on and on about this topic - maybe some other time I will. But for now, let me quote and explain a mishna in Pirkei Avot which was in this past Shabbat's perek in Israel but is in Va'etchanan's perek in Chutz LaAretz.

The mishna is in the 3rd perek; the numbering of the mishnayot within a perek differ, so I can't really tell you which mishna number it is. In fact, it might not help to tell you that the mishna is in the name of Rabbi Yaakov because some versions attribute the teaching to a Rabbi Shimon. But if you are looking it up, hopefully you will find it.

Rabbi Shimon (or Rabbi Yaakov) says: A person who is walking on the road and reviewing (a Torah topic, in his head), UMAFSIK MIMISHNATO and he interrupts his learning and says, What a beautiful tree that is or what a beautiful field that is - the verse in the Torah indicates that he is putting his life in jeopardy.

The standard understanding of this mishna is that Torah learning should not be interrupted for anything else, even the admiration of nature.

Another way of understanding this

mishna (which I came up with on my own many years ago and then saw it in Ethics from Sinai by Irving M. Bunim) is to view the person walking on the road and learning Torah in a broader sense, as a Jew who is walking on the road of life learning and living Torah, UMAFSIK MIMISHNATO - let's say, and he shuts off his Torah mind when he admires nature, not as the Creation of HaShem but as just nature, science, biology, et al. Such a person puts his life in jeopardy.

And what verse is the mishna talking about? It doesn't say in this mishna, but I would suggest it is the passage of Moshe's concern that the people will begin to venerate nature at the expense of their faith in G-d. Because that passage from our sedra also has a flip side. Lest a person look towards the heavens and see the Sun or the Moon... and go in the other direction - not see them as G-d's creations.

Let's run with this for a moment. With the danger of overdoing one's admiration in the direction of idolatry or going the other way and disconnecting nature and the study of science from one's Torah study, maybe it is better not to get involved in the sciences.

Comes the prophet Yishayahu in this week's haftara, the very last pasuk, where he says: S'U MAROM EINEICHEM... (there's your other

SH'MA) Lift up your eyes on high and see, who created these, who takes out their host by number; all of them He calls by name; because of His great might and because He is strong in power, no one is missing. **PTDT**