

“Praiseworthy are you Rabbi Akiva that your neshamah departed with the utterance of ‘echad’”

Examining the Last Teaching Written by the Sefas Emes before Passing Away

(in honor of the yahrzeit of the Sefas Emes, zy”a, the 5th of Shevat)

The yahrzeit of one of the forefathers of Chassidic thought, a true luminary, the esteemed Admor of Gur, the author of the Sefas Emes, falls out on Friday, the 5th of Shevat, during the week of parshas Bo. His commentary on the chumash and the Jewish festivals had a revolutionary impact on the teaching of Chassidut. They are among the minority of Chassidic literature that were written by the author himself on a weekly basis rather than by some disciple who heard him. Anyone who delves into his sacred insights is enriched and reaps incredible benefits regarding his battles with the yetzer, his constructive service of Hashem, his study of Torah, and his “yirah” of Hashem.

He was admired and esteemed by all the tzaddikim of his generation, who appreciated his greatness both in the revealed realms of the Torah, the teachings of Chassidut, and Jewish thought and philosophy. There is a well-known story that the holy Admor of Belz, the Maharid, zy”a, once told the son-in-law of the Sefas Emes before the blowing of the shofar on Rosh HaShanah that his father, the great Mahari, zy”a, raised his tallis and declared: **“I did not realize that a young disciple of Gur has such heavenly knowledge.”**

In the last essay the Sefas Emes wrote before passing away, he addresses the sacred declaration of unity—**“שמע ישראל ה’ אחד”—אלאקינו ה’ אחד**—which Yaakov Avinu instituted before passing away for all future generations of Jews. He concludes the essay with the words of the passuk (Mishlei 12, 19): **“שפת אמת תכונן ליעד”—true speech (“Sefas Emes”) is established forever!**

In the introduction to the volumes of the Sefas Emes on the Torah, his sons and sons-in-law wrote: **We have called**

the sefer “Sefas Emes,” because that is precisely what it is. Furthermore, in the last essay he wrote several days before his passing, in the current essay on parshas Vayechi 5665, he concluded his remarks with these words: “שפת אמת תכונן ליעד”.

The Final Essay of the Sefas Emes

We will begin by introducing a translation of that final essay written by the Sefas Emes with his own holy hand:

In the passuk (Bereishis 49, 1): “Gather together and I will tell you”—it is taught in the Midrash (B.R. 98, 3) that from here they merited receiving the mitzvah of Krias Shema, etc. For, we are taught (Avos 4, 11): “Every assembly which is ‘l’shem shamayim’ (for the sake of Heaven) will ultimately endure.” And this gathering was certainly “l’shem shamayim.” Therefore, it endures forever. And as the narrative (of Yaakov’s words to his sons) continues (ibid.): “What will happen to you at the end of days”—in other words, he was informing them that this gathering constituted a preparation for all future generations.

Also, their subsequent receiving of the Torah was on account of this. As it is written (Devarim 33, 4): “The Torah transmitted to us by Moshe is the heritage of the congregation of Yaakov.” The power of Yaakov assists every assembly that is “l’shem shamayim”; for Yaakov incorporated all of Yisrael, as it is taught in the Zohar hakadosh (Vayeitzei 163b). Therefore, on Shabbas Kodesh, which is a time of gathering, we are privileged to benefit from the heritage of Yaakov (Shabbas 118a). After all, all

of Yisrael are named after Yaakov and Yisrael. Thus, the entire source of assemblies is Yaakov . . . as it is written (Michah 7, 20): "Grant 'emet' to Yaakov." And an assembly that is "l'shem shamayim" is referred to as "emet," as it is written (Yirmiyah 10, 10): "But Hashem, G-d, is emes (True); and He endures."

And Krias Shema emanates from the gathering of the community of Yisrael. For, the attestation regarding HKB" H is not made by a single person but only by the community of Yisrael. As it is written: "Shema Yisrael." "Shema" is a gathering and assembly, and the name of Hashem, our G-d, rests on it; and it is destined to endure; as it is written: "Sefas Emes is established forever!"

In the World Called "Kol Yisrael" All the Neshamos Are in a State of Perfection

We will begin to shed some light on his incredible remarks by introducing an important, fundamental principle from the impeccable teachings of Rabbi Elimelech of Lizhensk, zy"a, in his sefer Noam Elimelech (Devarim). He comments on the passuk (Devarim 1, 1): "אלה הדברים אשר דבר משה אל כל ישראל"—these are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Yisrael. In this passuk, Moshe Rabeinu alludes to two wonderful methods of truly serving Hashem: Firstly, by uniting with and including oneself among the congregation of Yisrael. By doing so, a person merits being elevated to the exalted world known as "Kol Yisrael," where everything is unblemished.; it is the source of all Jewish neshamos. Secondly, by observing the Shabbas properly, which makes amends for all iniquities.

With regards to Moshe's first suggestion, he notes that prior to serving Hashem and praying, we utter the formula of **לשם יהוד כו' בשם כל ישראל**. Seeing as there is no perfect tzaddik on earth who has acted only virtuously and has not sinned (Koheles 7, 20), how is it possible to perform any act of kedushah with our tainted, flawed limbs?! After all, they have been used in the commission of aveiros. The tikun for this quandary (predicament) is to include oneself among the congregation of Yisrael; for there is a world known as "כל ישראל"—. It is a complete and perfect world without any flaws; because Yisrael as a whole are tzaddikim, as it is written (Yeshayah 60, 21): "And Your people are all tzaddikim." Hence, even if individuals occasionally sin, nevertheless, as a whole, they

always retain their kedushah. They lack a Satan and any harmful defects, chalilah. Their image remains constantly etched above and is referred to in our sacred sources as "**Adam Kadmon**." There, sin has no power or effect. So, if a person connects with this united entity, his tainted, blemished limb is rectified (imbued) with a heavenly kedushah. He is then able to perform said mitzvah or deed.

By employing this method advised by Moshe Rabeinu—ascending to the exalted world of "**Kol Yisrael**"—even a Jew down below in this world, who is associated with that world, is rendered clean and pure, free of any iniquity or flaw. Thus, he is able to perform the particular mitzvah in a perfect manner.

In parshas Kedoshim (5664), we find that the Sefas Emes actually alludes to this important principle presented by the Noam Elimelech. There, he writes:

We must perform all of the mitzvos for the sake of "kol Yisrael." This connects us with the kedushah that He sanctified us with via His mitzvos, which were given to the congregation of Yisrael as a whole, and they always remain holy. He then refers to what he explained elsewhere regarding the incident in the Gemara (Shabbas 31a), where a convert asks Hillel to teach him the entire Torah while he is standing on one leg. Hillel responds: "**Love your friend** (your fellow Jew) **as yourself.**" Because an individual is always subject to change; however, by connecting with one's fellow Jews through this mitzvah, one can always connect with the kedushah of the community as a whole.

The World of "Kol Yisrael" Is Revealed on Shabbas

Returning to the comments of the Noam Elimelech, we will now discuss his second suggestion for purifying oneself of all iniquities and blemishes prior to performing a mitzvah—by observing Shabbas properly. He asserts that the root of all sin stems from the "cheit Eitz HaDa'as." As a consequence of the sin, the earth was cursed with 39 curses; man's corruption stems from them. Yet, when man observes Shabbas properly, refraining from the 39 prohibited forms of labor, he rectifies the 39 curses, ridding himself of all the klipos. Hence, Chazal said (Shabbas 118b): "**Whoever observes Shabbas according to its halachos, even if he worshipped avodah-zarah** (like the generation of Enosh) **he is forgiven.**"

This is what Moshe Rabeinu, a”h, alluded to the holy nation with his sacred proclamation: “אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַדְּבָרִים”. The Gemara (ibid. 70a) deduces from these two words that there are 39 prohibited types of work on Shabbas. He alluded to the second method with the words “כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל”—uniting with and connecting oneself with the congregation of Yisrael. Thus, both are implied by the words: “אֱלֹהֶיךָ הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר דִּיבֶּר מֹשֶׁה אֱלֹהֶיךָ כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל”.

With immense pleasure, let us combine the two suggestions of the Noam Elimelech based on the marvelous teaching of his holy disciple, the Maggid of Kozhnitz, zy”a. In the sefer Ohr Yisrael on the Tikunei Zohar (37a), he interprets the formula we recite in our tefilos on Shabbas: “וַיַּגְהַד בְּכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל”— and may “Kol Yisrael” rest on it. For, the world of “Kol Yisrael” is revealed on Shabbas Kodesh; on Shabbas, the congregation of Yisrael achieves a degree of perfection and completeness.

Thus, it turns out that the two recommendations of the Noam Elimelech complement each other beautifully. For, by observing the Shabbas, we merit connecting with the universe of “Kol Yisrael,” where Yisrael achieves a state of perfection without any defects: “וַיַּגְהַד בְּכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל”.

The Neshamah of Yaakov Avinu Is Rooted in Adam Kadmon

Continuing on this sacred journey, we learn from the Sefas Emes the source of Yaakov Avinu’s amazing power to gather all of Yisrael together as one. Above, we presented his remarks, as follows: **The power of Yaakov assists every assembly that is “l’shem shamayim”; for Yaakov incorporated all of Yisrael, as it is taught in the Zohar hakadosh. Therefore, on Shabbas Kodesh, which is a time of gathering, we are privileged to benefit from the “heritage of Yaakov.” After all, all of Yisrael are named after Yaakov and Yisrael. Thus, the entire source of assemblies is Yaakov.**

Let us explain. It is evident from our sacred sefarim that this incredible universe referred to as “Kol Yisrael”—the source of all the untainted neshamos of Yisrael—is associated with Yaakov Avinu, who merited the distinguished name of Yisrael. HKB”H bestowed this name upon him, as it is written (Bereishis 35, 10): “וַיֹּאמֶר לוֹ אֶלְקִים שָׂמֵךְ יַעֲקֹב, לֹא יִקְרָא שָׁמֵךְ”—G-d said to him, “Your name is Yaakov; your name shall no longer

be called Yaakov, but rather Yisrael shall be your name.” And He named him Yisrael. The advantage gained from this additional name is that it enables Jews to always elevate themselves before performing mitzvos to the universe of “Kol Yisrael”—where flaws and sins are nonexistent. As such, they can perform the mitzvos in a state of perfection.

I would like to substantiate the fact that the root of the neshamah of Yaakov Avinu, who merited being named Yisrael, is from the universe known as “Kol Yisrael,” which the Noam Elimelech depicted above as **Adam Kadmon**. We will refer to the writings of the esteemed Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak of Lublin, zy”a, in his sefer Divrei emes (Vayeitzei). He comments on the passuk (ibid. 29, 1): “וַיֹּשֶׁא יַעֲקֹב רֶגֶלְיוֹ וַיָּלֹךְ”—**Yaakov lifted his feet and went toward the land of the people of the East.**

He interprets this to mean that Yaakov ascended from his madreigah in Olam HaZeh and went up to his root in **Adam Kadmon** alluded to by the word “kedem.” His goal was to extend the various types of “chesed”—referred to as “bnei kedem”—to the people of Yisrael until the end of the galus—i.e., the coming of Mashiach. This concurs fantastically with what we have learned—that Yaakov Avinu is the root of the neshamos of Yisrael in the universe named after him, “Kol Yisrael.”

We can suggest that Chazal alluded to this by saying (B.M. 84a): “שׁוֹפְרִיה דַיּוֹקָב אֲבִינוּ מֵעַיִן שׁוֹפְרִיה דָאַדָּם הָרָאַשׁוֹן”—the radiance (beauty) of Yaakov Avinu resembled the radiance of **Adam HaRishon**. In other words, “the radiance of Yaakov Avinu”—referring to the source of his neshamah—emanated from “the radiance of Adam HaRishon”—namely, **Adam Kadmon**—which the Noam Elimelech teaches us is where the source of the unsullied neshamos of Yisrael called “Kol Yisrael” is located.

This provides us with a better understanding of what we learned from the Maggid of Kozhnitz, zy”a. He taught us that the exalted universe of “Kol Yisrael” is revealed on every Shabbas Kodesh. For this reason, they instituted the formula we recite in our tefilos on Shabbas: “וַיַּגְהַד בְּכָל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִקְדָּשֵׁי שְׁמֵךְ”. For, as we know, Shabbas Kodesh is the heritage of Yaakov Avinu, as we have learned in the Gemara (Shabbas 118a): “בְּכָל הַמְעֻנָּג אֶת הַשְׁבָּת וּתְנִינָּי לֹו נְחַלָּה בְּלִי מִצְרִים, שְׁנָאָמָר אַז תַּתְעַנְג עַל הַוְּהַרְכָּתִיךְ”—**Whoever delights in the land of Egypt, let him fast on Shabbas.**

Shabbas is rewarded with a portion without boundaries, as it states (Yeshayah 58, 14): “Then you will delight in Hashem, and I will mount you astride the heights of the world; I will provide you the heritage of your forefather Yaakov.” Therefore, it is specifically on Shabbas Kodesh that this universe, which is the source of the neshamos of Yisrael, named after our forefather **Yisrael**, is revealed.

It gives me immense pleasure to add what the Sefas Emes (Vayishlach) writes in relation to the passuk (Bereishis 33, 20): “**וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְאַבְרָהָם וְיִקְרָא לְאֶתְנָהָרָה לְאַלְקָנָה**”—and he called it “El is the G-d of Yisrael.” They expound on this passuk in the Gemara (Megillah 18a) “**מִנְיָן שְׁקָרָא הַקָּבָ"ה לַעֲקָב אֶל**, **שְׁנָאָמָר וַיִּקְרָא לְאֶל אֶלְקָנָה**”—where do we see that HKB”H called Yaakov “El”? For it says: “And He called him ‘El,’ the G-d of Yisrael.”

The Sefas Emes explains that here we find that Yaakov Avinu was granted a status not granted to any of the other tzaddikim (Midrash Tanchuma Toldos 7). HKB”H does not associate his name with tzaddikim during their lifetime. Yet, here, HKB”H did associate His name with Yaakov Avinu. This is because Yaakov represents the entirety of the people of Yisrael. HKB”H does associate His name with the entire congregation, as is evident from the fact that we say “**Elokeinu**”—“our G-d.” Thus, we see here that HKB”H fulfilled Yaakov’s request (ibid. 28, 21): “**וְהִיה הַלְּלִי לְאֶלְקָנִים**”—and Hashem will be a G-d to me.

In keeping with this discussion, we can explain why HKB”H bestowed His name on Yaakov Avinu while he was still alive specifically in relation to the name Yisrael, as it is written: “**וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה לְאַבְרָהָם וְיִקְרָא לְאֶל אֶלְקָנָה**”. It is because in the heavenly realm known as “**Kol Yisrael**” all of the neshamos of Yisrael are in a state of perfection—untainted and blameless. As such, they deserve to be associated with the name of HKB”H even while alive.

When Reciting Krias Shema We Ascend to the Universe of “Kol Yisrael”

Following this sublime path, we will now elaborate on the last part of the final essay of the Sefas Emes presented above. He connects the intent of Krias Shema with Yaakov Avinu, the epitome of “emet”: **And Krias Shema emanates from the gathering of the community of Yisrael. For, the attestation regarding HKB”H is not made by a single**

person but only by the community of Yisrael. As it is written: “**Shema Yisrael.**” “Shema” is a gathering and assembly, and the name of Hashem, our G-d, rests on it; and it is destined to endure; as it is written: “**Sefas Emes is established forever!**”

With regards to the focus and intent of Krias Shema, the Avudraham writes: **It is customary to say it aloud to enhance the focus of the first passuk, which is the essence of its intent. Also, it is the way testimony is given; as if every individual is saying to his fellow: “Listen, I believe that Hashem, our G-d, is the only One in His universe.” Hence, you find that the “ayin” of “**שְׁמָעָ**” is enlarged and the “dalet” of “**אֶחָד**” is also enlarged, which spells “**עָד**”, alluding to testimony.**

Furthermore, we know that the Shulchan Aruch rules (C.M. 34, 1): **A rasha is not qualified to testify.** That being the case, we can ask if any Jew is qualified to recite Krias Shema, attesting to the oneness of HKB”H. After all, the wisest of all men said (Koheles 7, 20): “**כִּי אָדָם אֵין צְדִיק בָּאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יִעַשֶּׂה טֹב וְלֹא יִחְטֹא**”—**for there is no man so wholly righteous on earth that he always does good and never sins.** If this is true of a tzaddik, how much more so of someone who is not considered a tzaddik!

The answer is contained in the sacred, insightful words of the Sefas Emes just quoted: **And Krias Shema emanates from the gathering of the community of Yisrael. For, the attestation regarding HKB”H is not made by a single person but only by the community of Yisrael.** As it is written: “**Shema Yisrael.**” “Shema” is a gathering and assembly, and the name of Hashem, our G-d, rests on it. When we say “**Shema Yisrael**” out loud, we are gathering together and uniting. Thus, all Jewish neshamos ascend to the world of “**Kol Yisrael**,” where they are free of sin and wrongdoing. As such, each of us is qualified to give valid, truthful testimony regarding the oneness of HKB”H.

This explains beautifully the passage in the Zohar hakadosh (Terumah 135a): “**רֹזֵא דְשִׁבְתָּה אֵינוֹ שְׁבֵת דְאַתְּחָדָת בְּרוּזָא דְאַחַד, וְהָא אָוְקִימָנוּ רֹזֵא דָה' אַחַד וְשְׁמוּ אַחַד**”—**the mystery of Shabbas is that on Shabbas everything is united in the mystery of Oneness;**

as we have explained, this is the mystery (concealed meaning) of "Hashem is One and His name is One." So, we see that Shabbas Kodesh and Krias Shema go hand in hand. On Shabbas, the universe of "Kol Yisrael" (the source of the neshamos of Yisrael) is revealed. We express this fact by reciting: "ז' ינוחו בו כל ישראל"—and may "Kol Yisrael" rest on it. Similarly, by reciting Krias Shema, we gather together in unity to ascend to the universe of "Kol Yisrael."

Makkas Bechoros Struck a Decisive Blow to the Klipah of Mitzrayim

We will conclude this essay by explaining what the Sefas Emes (Bo 5636) wrote concerning Makkas Bechoros. The firstborns of Mitzrayim were the basis and essence of the klipah of Mitzrayim. The rest of the Egyptians were the branches of the klipah. Therefore, HKB" H began His assault on Mitzrayim by striking the branches with the first nine makkos. Then, with the last "makkah," Makkas Bechoros, He subjugated and destroyed the foundation of their klipah. In this manner, the klipah of Mitzrayim was thoroughly annihilated.

By attacking the root of the klipah with this final "makkah," HKB" H awakened and revealed, correspondingly, the kedushah of Yisrael. HKB" H emphasizes this fact by declaring (Shemos 4, 22): "בְּנֵי בָּנְיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל"—**My firstborn son is Yisrael**. He is informing us that even though Yisrael sank to the 49th level of tumah in Mitzrayim, notwithstanding, from the perspective of the pure essence of their neshamos in the universe of "Kol Yisrael," they are perfect. Hence, they are worthy of the appellation: "בְּנֵי בָּנְיָה יִשְׂרָאֵל".

Behold, the Sefas Emes was privileged to conclude writing his novel insights in Olam HaZeh by focusing on the declaration of unity of Krias Shema, **שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד**, which Yaakov Avinu—the root of the neshamos of Yisrael—instigated prior to his passing away. Thus, the pronouncement of the "bat kol"—the heavenly voice—accompanying the passing away of Rabbi Akiva (Berachos 61b), was also true of him: **אשריך רבי עקיבא שיצאה נשמהתך באהדך**—praiseworthy are you (Rabbi Akiva) that your neshamah departed with the utterance of "echad." May his merit protect us and all of Yisrael! Amen.



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