



Parashat Vayechi is most famously known for Yaakov's final words to his sons before his passing, in which he delivers a personal, prophetic message to each of his twelve sons. The Gemara in Masekhet Pesachim (56a) adds a narrative that does not appear in the *Chumash*, telling that before Yaakov began to deliver these personal messages, he wished to reveal to his children when the final redemption would arrive. As he prepared to disclose this information, however, he suddenly lost his prophetic powers. Concerned that this loss of prophecy may have been due to the unworthiness of one of his sons, he asked them whether they are all genuinely committed to the service of the one, true God. The twelve sons declared in unison the verse, "*Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeinu Hashem echad*" – "Hear, Israel: the Lord our God – the Lord is one!" Yaakov felt gratified over his sons' response and replied, "*Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto le-olam va-ed*" ("Blessed is the Name of the Glory of His Kingship forever and ever!"). The Gemara concludes that this exchange between Yaakov and his sons forms the basis of our custom to declare "*Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto...*" after we recite the verse of "*Shema Yisrael*" each morning and evening.

Maimonides, in his presentation of the laws of *shema* (Hilkhot Keri'at Shema 1:4), presents a different version of this story. According to his account, Yaakov did not seek to disclose information concerning the final redemption. Rather, Yaakov simply exhorted his sons to follow "the ways of God," and they declared "*Shema Yisrael*" to express their formal acceptance of his words of admonition, their commitment to remain loyal to his beliefs and teachings. In response, Yaakov declared, "*Barukh Shem Kevod Malkhuto...*" and for this reason we add "*Barukh Shem Kevod...*" after reciting the verse of "*Shema Yisrael...*" Maimonides' account is based on a passage in the Midrash *Bamidbar Rabba* (2:7), which he apparently deemed more authoritative than the account in the Gemara.

Many scholars have wondered why Maimonides includes this account in his presentation of the laws of *keri'at shema*. *Mishneh Torah* is a code of law, in which Maimonides generally limits himself to the practical halakhic guidelines as he understood them. Why does he digress onto the historical background of the addition of "*Barukh Shem Kevod...*" in the recitation of *shema*?

It appears that Maimonides viewed the formal declaration of Yaakov's sons as the paradigm of *kabalat ol Malkhut Shamayim* (acceptance of Divine Kingship) that must be experienced each time one recites the *shema*. We may consider a number of different

factors that characterized this formal acceptance, the most obvious of which, perhaps, is the context of life in a foreign culture and under foreign rule. Yaakov takes leave of his sons in Egypt, where they were dependent on the grace and support of a foreign government. Yaakov understood the cultural pressures that his descendants would face under such circumstances, and he therefore asked, in Maimonides' words, "Is there perchance unfitness among you, somebody who does not join with me [in my belief] in divine oneness?" *Chazal*, when establishing the procedure for the *shema* recitation, perhaps wanted us to ask ourselves this same question twice each day. As we are regularly exposed to potentially competing and conflicting loyalties, we come to the synagogue twice each day and firmly declare, "*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad.*" Despite the many pressures and influences to which we are subject, ultimately, we recognize only a single authority, we subjugate ourselves only to the Almighty.

For this reason, perhaps, Maimonides saw fit to include this account in his exposition of the laws of *shema* – to emphasize that our *kabalat ol Malkhut Shamayim* must resemble that of Yaakov's sons, whereby we declare unequivocally that regardless of the time and culture in which we live, our exclusive loyalty and subservience is to the one, true God.