

# Vayechi

Frogs and the Shema

*Gather and listen, sons of Yaakov; listen to Israel your father.*

Bereishis 49:2

When Yaakov was close to death, he called for his sons. “Maybe after I die, you will begin to worship other gods?” They said to him, ‘Hear, O Israel: Hashem our God, Hashem is the one and only,’ and Yaakov whispered back, ‘Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.’”<sup>1</sup>

The frog could not sting, and the scorpion could not swim. So the frog took the scorpion on its back, at great personal sacrifice. After all, the scorpion could bite the frog at any moment. They crossed the river where the scorpion proceeded to fatally bite the man whom Hashem had condemned to death.<sup>2</sup>

When King David completed the book of Psalms – the greatest song that any man has written to G-d – he began feeling very good about himself. He wondered to G-d, “Is there any creature that sings to You as beautifully as I do?” A frog appeared and told him, Don’t be too proud of yourself, David; I sing a much greater song than you. And that is not all – there is a species that lives near the sea, and when it is hungry, it takes me and eats me.<sup>3</sup>

What possessed Chananya, Mishael and Azariah to throw themselves into the fiery furnace? They reasoned: If the frogs [during the plague of Frogs in Egypt] threw themselves into fiery furnaces despite the fact that they are not obligated to do so – we, who have been commanded to give our lives for Kiddush Hashem, must certainly do so!<sup>4</sup>

The frog sings, “*Baruch shem kivod malchuso liolam vaed*” – Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity – says Perek Shira.

“When Moshe went up to Heaven, he heard the angels reciting, ‘*Baruch shem kivod malchuso liolam vaed*,’ and taught it to the Jews; but we must say it quietly because it is angelic. On Yom Kippur, when the Jew is nearly an angel, he can then recite it aloud.”<sup>5</sup>

The frog recites a song that even man cannot sing. David was shown an aspect of the frog that even man can often fall short of. What can this be? The world is a symphony. It is meant

---

1 Pesachim 56a; text above translated directly from Dvarim Rabbah 2:34. See also Targum Yonason, Bereishis 49:3

2 Nedarim 41a

3 Perek Shira

4 Pesachim 53b

5 Yalkut Shimoni, Dvarim 834

to consist of components all working harmoniously toward the ultimate goal of *kvod Shomayim*, the honor of Heaven. Every being is really no more than an ingredient in the grand scheme of G-d's will. The frog in Egypt gave his life for G-d's plan. The frog gives his life in the natural world to the animal that needs to eat him for survival. He transports scorpions on his back when G-d needs them to cross rivers.

The ultimate song is when one can find his place in the world, and live in perfect harmony, so that he knows how to give himself completely to the greater song of Hashem's plan. Sound, silence and impeccable timing are vital for an orchestra to sound perfect. The frog is the animal that symbolizes that all is really here for nothing other than *kvod Shomayim*. It is an animal that forgoes its immediate survival instinct and answers to a higher instinct.

The frog says, "*Baruch shem kvod malchuso liolam vaed*," which we cannot even say aloud. But the frog screams, and his croaking is constant!<sup>6</sup>

The frog was saying to David – "My entire existence is dedicated to the fulfillment of Hashem's will, even if it means complete self-sacrifice. You were also created to be nothing more than a tool for *kvod Shomayim*. Are you there yet?" On Yom Kippur, the greatest Jew is doing no more than imitating the croak of a frog!

When one recites the first line of the Shema, he is meant to close his eyes. While the simple reason is that this enhances one's concentration,<sup>7</sup> there is Kabbalistic depth as well.<sup>8</sup> One cannot fathom the oneness of God. One is meant to recite the first verse of Shema, feeling as though he would be willing to give his life for the sake of Kiddush Hashem, should he need to.<sup>9</sup> We must let our entire world go black if that is what Hashem desires. But possibly even more difficult is lighting up our entire world, and dedicating our entire existence – constantly, as the frog does – to everything noble and real.

We say the Shema with our eyes closed, but we recite *baruch shem* with our eyes open.<sup>10</sup> We must engage in this world, and elevate every single area of it to holiness.<sup>11</sup> We must be willing

---

6 Among all animals, the frog is unusual in that he never ceases his croaks, according to the *Zohar*, Pinchas 232b. See also *Perek Bishir* (published with Taama Dikra) of R. Chaim Kanievsky 64.

7 *Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim*, 61

8 *Siddur Arizal*, and others. See *Piskei Teshuvos*, vol. 1, p. 544.

9 *Shnei Luchos Habris*, Assarah Hillulim, Shaar Hayichud, Hashem Elokeinu Hashem Echad, *Zohar*, vol. 3, 121a; and see also *Agra Dikallah* to Shoftim 20:3. See *Magid Taaluma* to Brachos 2a, s.v. *meimasai*; there, it explains that one who gives his life sincerely when he reads the Shema is forgiven as if his life were, in fact, taken, and he achieves forgiveness for all of his sins, even those that our Sages teach can not be forgiven until death – for it is as if he died.

10 This is according to all opinions but that of Ben Ish Chai (Vaera 6). However, he only says that one should keep his eyes closed through *baruch shem* to enhance concentration, not for the more mystical reasons. See also *Mor Ukeitzuya* by R. Yaakov Emden (46), who is of the opinion that Shema must always be accompanied by *baruch shem*, even according to the opinion that one must technically recite no more than the verse Shema. He explains that a vital part of the Shema sentence is the *baruch shem* that follows it!

11 See *Nefesh Hachaim*, *shaar* 3 (as explained in depth by R. Moshe Wolfson, *Emunas Itecha* to Vaera), that

to give everything! It is not nearly as hard to die for what is right, as it is to live every moment in truth and discipline. In a moment of pain, great people have given their lives. But there have been far fewer who have given their entire lives to Hashem, and have lived every moment for the very same Hashem that they are prepared to die for. This is what Yaakov asked of his children when he was dying. Can you live as Jews? Yaakov demands this of us. The frog demands this from us. How will we respond?

---

the verse of Shema talks of Hashem's unity in the higher worlds, whereas *baruch shem* talks of His unity in this world, where it is hidden and can seem as though Hashem is absent.