

MORASHAH
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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Va'etchanan

This week's *parashah* contains some of the most famous parts of the Torah. Besides the second version of the Ten Commandments, it also contains the *Shema* and *V'ahavta*. By commenting on their relationship, we have the opportunity to better understand not only the portion but the *siddur*, as well.

While a great deal can be said about the *Shema* itself, and its importance vis-a-vis Jewish prayer, it is also helpful to put it into a context. Each recitation of the *Shema*, morning and evening, allows us to testify to Judaism's principal goal, acknowledging God's sovereignty. Yet the verse itself, as it stands in the Torah, makes no mention of God as king. Only by means of the insertion found in the *siddur*, "*Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed*," can we read into the *Shema* the concept of God as monarch. To better understand how such a line not found in our Torah portion got there, we must first appreciate that the *Shema* was not always the most important prayer, as we perceive it.

According to some scholars, the *Shema* actually followed the Ten Commandments in the order of reciting Biblical selections to make up the earliest worship services. How is this possible? Think about it. The Ten Commandments begin with God speaking to the nation, acknowledging that God alone took them out of Egypt, that God alone is to be worshipped, that the nation is to acknowledge and pray to no other object or form. This is the message the nation **heard** at Sinai. The *Shema* and *V'ahavta* came to reinforce the message presented orally by God to the nation. In this way, the *Shema* was to be understood as the acceptance of the demands made by God on the nation and by accepting that authority, God is understood to be in control. The words of the *V'ahavta* paragraph then come to further reinforce this idea by showing the nation's acceptance of the commandments as the vehicle by which this authority is fulfilled in the daily life of the nation. Yet, suggest the same scholars, at a certain time, the rabbis removed the Ten Commandments from the worship service, but needed to maintain the message of God's sovereignty. This was accomplished by separating the *Shema* from the *V'ahavta* paragraph as found in our portion and inserting between the two a Rabbinic statement "Blessed be the Name of His Glorious Kingdom for ever and ever". As important as this insertion may be, since it was only Rabbinic and not Torah, in order not to truly disrupt the Torah selection the insertion was recited silently and not aloud. The one exception to that practice, classically being on Yom Kippur, the one day that we culminate all of our prayers extolling God as king. Furthermore, the *V'ahavta* paragraph refers to "*devarim*" – words or statements. While today we see it as referring back to the words of the

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Shema, in earlier times, it may have referred back to the Ten Commandments, known classically as “*Aseret Hadibrot*,” the Ten Statements.

The question then remains, why, if the Ten Commandments were so important did the rabbis remove it from the service? One possible answer is that, in order to emphasize that the entire Torah – and not simply the Ten Commandments – was given at Sinai, as some competing religious sects claimed, the rabbis themselves removed the Ten Commandments from the prayer-service, thus de-emphasizing its implied significance and concurrently raising the importance of the *Shema* and *V’ahavta*.

Today, then, not only do we find no mention of the Ten Commandments in the formal worship service, as important as they may be for the moral-ethical foundation of society, but we continue to acknowledge the *Shema* along with the *V’ahavta* as the prayer par excellence for its message of ethical- monotheism and for recognizing God’s authority.

Shabbat Shalom!

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