



אחד ומיוחד

One: Unique and Unifying

■ Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Nechunya

What is the secret of “long life”? How can we attain this blessing?

The Gemara dedicates an entire passage to exploring this issue, quoting a host of long-lived Tannaim and Amoraim [Talmudic Sages from before and after the destruction of the Second Temple] who explain to their students the “secrets” of their longevity. Let us examine, for instance, the following fascinating Talmudic exchange between two Torah giants, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Nechunya HaGadol:

R. Akiva asked R. Nechunya: “How did you merit such long life?”

R. Nechunya’s servants [took offense and] wanted to strike R. Akiva, who ran and climbed a tree to escape them. He then yelled down: “If the Torah says *‘lamb’*, why does it say *‘one’*?” (This question will be explained below.)

R. Nechunya then said to them: “Don’t touch him, he is a Torah scholar.”

R. Akiva climbed down from the tree, and R. Nechunya said to him: “The word *‘one’* in the verse that you quoted means ‘special,’ in that the chosen lamb should be unique in its flock.”

R. Nechunya then answered R. Akiva’s original question: “I merited long life because of three things: I never received gifts, I was willing to forego my honor, and I gave in easily in monetary disputes.”
(Megillah 28a)

R. Nechunya's servants originally mistakenly thought that R. Akiva meant to insult their master, as if to say, "When will you die already?!" But of course, Rabbi Akiva meant only to ask his secret for long life, in order that he could learn the proper way to behave and possibly merit the same.

In light of the misunderstanding, R. Akiva attempted to clarify his intention with his second question. R. Nechunya understood him, and we, too, must try to understand the connection between the two. This second question was based on the following seemingly strange verse in Parashat Pinchas:

אֶת הַכֶּבֶשׂ אֶחָד תַּעֲשֶׂה בַבֹּקֶר...

Prepare the one lamb in the morning, and the other one in the afternoon [for the daily Tamid sacrifices]. (Bamidbar 28,4)

The problematic nature of this verse lies in its grammar. In English, phrases such as "the blue sky" or "the one lamb" require "the" only once - at the beginning. Hebrew, however, is different in two ways: First of all, the noun precedes the adjective: "the sky blue" and not "the blue sky." Secondly, in Hebrew we place "the" not only before the first word, but before all the words. In the case at hand, the Torah should have written "the lamb the one." Why, then, did it write הכבש אחד, "*the lamb one*," leaving out "the" before "*one*"? (It cannot be that the purpose was to emphasize "only one lamb," because by writing "*lamb*" in singular, that point is already made.)

The question intensifies given that the same phrase appears in the same context in Parashat Tetzaveh (Sh'mot 29,39) in the correct format: הכבש האחד, "*the lamb the one*," as it should be! Why, then, is it not the same in Parashat Pinchas?

We must also clarify R. Nechunya's answer to R. Akiva's original question, and why those three specific character traits contributed to his longevity of life.

■ The Unifier

The question about "*the one*" leads us to the fundamental verse *Shma Yisrael*, which ends with the words ה' אחד, *Hashem is One*. The Gemara (B'rachot 13b) quotes a Sage named Sumchus as teaching: "Whoever extends the word *One* while reciting this verse, Hashem will extend his days and years."

We see that both Rabbi Akiva and Sumchus found a link between "one" and longevity of life. Rabbi Akiva chose to ask about the word "one" while seeking to understand how long life is achieved, and Sumchus noted

the connection even more directly. What is the exact nature of this link between “one” and long life?

The words “*Hashem is One*” come not only to stress G-d’s singularity, but also to assign us the responsibility of uniting all of existence under His leadership. How is this done? The Kriat Shma passage tells us, via the following four pairs of contrasting elements, that we must study Torah under many different conditions:

*When you sit in your home, and
when you walk on the way,*

בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ –
וּבְלַכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ,

*when you go to sleep
and when you awake.*

וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ –
וּבְקוּמְךָ.

*You shall bind them as a sign
upon your hand,
and they shall be frontlets
on your head.*

וְקִשְׂרֹתֵם לְאוֹת
עַל יָדְךָ –
וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת
בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ.

*You shall write [and place] them
on your doorposts
and on your gates.*

וְכָתַבְתֶּם
עַל מְזוֹזוֹת בְּיַתְדְךָ –
וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ.

We must study G-d’s word in every situation and in every place, even when they contrast with each other, and thus unify and render singular G-d’s Name. In light of this clear lesson, our Sages reinforced it by adding some contrasting pairs of their own to the Kriat Shma commandments of loving G-d and declaring His oneness:

*You must love Hashem
With all your heart –
with both your good inclination
and your evil inclination*

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱ-לֹהֶיךָ
בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ

*and with all your soul –
even if He takes it;
in your lifetime and when you die*

וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ

and with all your essence (meodekha)

– *thank Him no matter what measure*

וּבְכָל מְאֹדָהּ.

(middah) He metes out to you.

And what does Kriat Shma tell us in its second passage?

לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאֲבוֹתֵיכֶם
לְתַתּ לָהֶם כִּימֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל הָאָרֶץ.

*[If you do the above,] you and your children will merit
longevity on the land G-d swore to your ancestors, to give it to
them as long as the heavens are above the earth. (D'varim 11,21)*

This tells us clearly that the secret of longevity is connected with the fundamental concept of unity. Let us explain how.

■ Long Life

Each of us comes to the world with a mission, and we are equipped with hours and minutes of life by which we might successfully fulfill it. Nearly half of our lives, however, are generally not fully utilized, such as the time we spend sleeping, traveling, etc. If we are able to make the most of these times as well, we thus lengthen our lives by that much! If we make sure to attain “longevity” in this manner, then we may ask Hashem for “extra years.”

With this, let us turn to two short passages in the Book of Proverbs, where King Solomon makes exactly this point:

תְּחִלַּת חִכְמָה יִרְאֵת ה' וְדַעַת קְדוֹשִׁים בִּינָה.
כִּי בִי יִרְבוּ יָמֶיהָ וְיִוָּסְפוּ לָהּ שָׁנוֹת חַיִּים.

*The beginning of wisdom is the fear of G-d,
and the knowledge of the holy ones is understanding.
For with me shall your days increase, and they will
add you years of life. (Mishlei 9,10-11)*

The verse refers first to “*your days will increase*,” meaning that each day is worth more, and then “*years of life*” will be added. Similarly:

בְּנֵי תוֹרָתִי אֵל תִּשְׁכַּח וּמִצְוֹתַי יִצַּר לָבֶדֶךָ.
כִּי אֶרְךָ יָמִים וּשְׁנוֹת חַיִּים וְשָׁלוֹם יוֹסִיפוּ לָךְ.

*My son, forget not My instruction, and may your heart keep
My commandments; for they shall add length of days and
years of life and peace to you. (3,1-2)*

In Kriat Shma, the Torah advises us exactly how to take full advantage of our sleep time and our travel time: “Review the Torah and think about its words and mitzvot when you arise and when you sleep, when you are at home and when you travel...” By doing so, we extend our lives. We must do so, our Sages say, even when we feel depressed or overtaken by sad events: We must learn how to turn these times into a source of strength by which to come closer to G-d: “*With all your soul* – even when He takes your soul... *With all your essence* – in every way that He deals with you...”

Let us return to the story in the Gemara. After R. Akiva’s strange question about “*the lamb one*,” R. Nechunya answered that the word “*one*” appears in this unique manner to teach that the chosen lamb should be unique in its flock. The word *meyuchad* (unique) comes from the same root as both *echad*, one, and *l'ached*, to unite. That is, the chosen lamb must be unique, a leader that unites the entire flock behind him.

The leader knows how to dole out jobs and responsibilities in accordance with each one’s unique skills, for the sake of a single common goal. A wise leader knows how to harness even those who oppose him, the “un-utilized portion of the flock” – just as we learn from Kriat Shma that we must take advantage of all our time, even at night, even when we travel, and even when we are depressed.

This answer by R. Nechuniah – that “the one” means “the special one,” the leader – corresponds precisely to the giant personality of R. Akiva. He held fast to the concept of G-d’s unity all his life, even during his very last minutes when he died for the Sanctification of G-d’s Name with the words *G-d is One* on his lips. As the Gemara so dramatically records:

When the Romans led R. Akiva out for his execution, it was the time for the recital of Shma. As they combed his flesh with iron combs, R. Akiva accepted upon himself the yoke of Heaven. His disciples said to him: ‘O master, even to this extent?!’

He said to them: ‘All my life I was troubled by this verse, “*You shall love the Lord your G-d ...with all your soul*” – [meaning,] even if He takes your soul. I asked myself when I would have the opportunity to fulfill this. Now that the opportunity has arrived, should I not fulfill it?’

He protracted the word *One* [in the phrase *G-d is One*], so that his soul departed with that word. A heavenly voice issued forth, saying: ‘Happy is Rabbi Akiva, whose soul departed with the word *One*.’”

(B’rachot 61b)

In his last dramatic seconds, Rabbi Akiva explained to his students that throughout his life, “I extended my best efforts to ‘unify’ G-d – that is, to show that the entire world functions harmoniously under His supervision. I did this in every situation, even contrasting ones, as required in Kriat Shma: when I went to sleep and when I awakened, when I traveled and when I sat at home, when things went well and when they did not. But I never got to fulfill this mitzvah “*with all [my] soul*,” that is, in both life and death. When finally this chance has arisen, should I not jump at it?!”

And in fact, Rabbi Akiva apparently learned the secret of longevity, meriting to live 120 years.

■ Torah Text Twice, Translation Once

Based on the above, we can explain a famous Rabbinically-prescribed practice, known as *shnayim mikra v'echad targum*. It means reviewing the appropriate Torah portion every week three times: twice the text itself, and once in its Aramaic translation. The Gemara (B'rachot 8a-b) states as follows:

Rav Huna bar Yehuda said in the name of R. Ami: “One should always complete with the congregation the reading of the weekly Torah portion – even the list of cities *Atarot and Divon, etc.* (Bamidbar 32,3) – twice from the Torah and once from the Targum, for whoever does so will merit long life.”

No source is mentioned for the promise of long life. But a comparison between Kriat Shma and this teaching will help us find one. Let us look at the structure of Shma, and we will find that it embodies *shnayim mikra v'echad targum*, and even explains why we must repeat each verse twice.

In the first verse we find this two-part phrase: “*Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is One.*” Initially it seems to tell us some general information, but when we read it again, we see that it is very specific and negates any other possibility. The second part is actually the deep meaning of the first part. That is, when we say *Hashem is our G-d*, we mean *Hashem is One*, because Hashem fills our entire world, and there is no room for anything else. However, when we first read *Hashem is our G-d*, it is hard to plumb the depths of its meaning and realize that it also means G-d’s exclusivity. We therefore repeat: *G-d is One*, thus making it perfectly clear that He and only He fills our world.

We thus see the importance of *shnayim mikra v'echad targum* and why we must repeat each verse twice – in order to go beyond its superficial

understanding. Even this is not sufficient, however; we also require a Targum, a translation. The word “Targum” in Aramaic parallels “commentary” in Hebrew. This tells us that even a text that is read twice requires a commentary afterwards. When R. Yehuda rebuked R. Chiya (B’rachot 18a), he said to him: “If you read it once, you did not read it twice; and if you read it twice, you did not read it three times; and if you read it three times, it was not explained to you.” This tells us that the third time must be accompanied by an explanation, without which it cannot be understood no matter how many more times it is read.

We saw in Shma Yisrael “twice the text,” but where is the Targum? Where is the explanation? The answer lies in that which we said above, that the passage of Shma itself explains how to implement “*G-d is One*” via the pairs of contrasts that must be unified: at home and on the way, tefillin on your arm and on your head, etc.

In short, the passage of Kriat Shma exemplifies *shnayim mikra v’echad targum*, beginning with the verse and continuing in the *V’ahavta* passage.

Even the very teaching that “one should always complete the reading of the weekly Torah portion with the congregation” finds its expression in Kriat Shma, as follows: The two portions of *V’ahavta* and *V’haya im shamo’a* have very similar themes. Aside from the “reward and punishment” aspect in the second passage, however, there is a major difference between them: The first is written in singular, talking to the entire national entity, while the second is written in plural form, addressed to the various individuals.

(We find a similar singular-plural format when it comes to counting: The verse “*you must count [the Jubilee years]*” (Vayikra 25,8) is written in singular, referring to a mitzvah incumbent only upon the Sanhedrin, representing the entire nation. On the other hand, “*you must count [the Omer]*” (23,15) is written in plural, incumbent upon each individual.)

The combination of the two Shma passages teaches that each individual should try to be in tandem with the community, in learning the weekly portion, in prayer, and in Kriat Shma. And if he does so, what will be his reward? The end of the second passage of Shma tells us:

לְמַעַן יִרְבּוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיְמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאָדָמָה...

*So that your days and those of your children will
be lengthened upon the land...* (D’varim 11,21)

This, then, is the source for that which we learned in the above Gemara: “Whoever completes the reading of the weekly Torah portion with the congregation will merit long life.”

■ Atarot and Divon

Why does the Gemara specify “even the verse of *Atarot and Divon*” as one that must be read with its translation? Rashi explains that this is a verse that has no Aramaic translation, and one might have thought that it need not be read more than twice; this is why even this verse must be read with its “translation,” i.e., a third time in Hebrew. But this does not explain why specifically this verse was chosen, out of the many verses of names of places and people that have no Aramaic translation?

To answer this, let us study the verse itself in context:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי גָד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה... עֲטָרוֹת וְדִיבֹן וַיַּעְזֵר וְנִמְרָה...
הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה ה' לִפְנֵי עַדְת יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶרֶץ מְקִנָּה הוּא וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ מְקִנָּה...
The descendants of Gad and Reuven came and spoke to Moshe... saying, “Atarot, Divon, Ya’zer and Nimrah... is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.”

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִם מְצָאנוּ חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ יִתֵּן אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לַעֲבָדֶיךָ לְאִחְזָה;
אֵל תַּעֲבִרְנוּ אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן.
And they said, “If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants as an inheritance; do not take us across the Jordan.” (Bamidbar 32,2-5)

The sons of Gad and Reuven open by saying that the land is good for livestock – a broad hint that that is why they want it. They then specify clearly that they have livestock; surely now no one can fail to realize that they want that land. Despite this, Moshe Rabbeinu does not respond, as if not understanding what they want. The Torah therefore tells us that they presented their claims yet again: “**And they said: ‘If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants...’**”

In short, the entire structure of this passage is one of *shnayim mikra v’echad targum*: The request is repeated twice, and then explained for yet a third time. This is why the Gemara says that even the verse of *Atarot and Divon* must be repeated a third time, as if to say: “Even a Torah passage that itself includes a repetition plus an explanation must be read over by each individual in this fashion.”

■ The Uniting Force

The phrase “*Hashem is One*” has still another very special meaning: “G-d is He Who unifies the entire universe; without Him, it would collapse and fall apart.”

We can understand this “unity-or-collapse” structure by looking at the world of physics, on the atomic level. Every atom in the world has a nucleus, which itself has positively-charged protons and no-charge neutrons. In constant orbit around the nucleus are electrons, a third type of particle that is negatively-charged. What holds the electrons in orbit around the nucleus? Why don't they simply fly off into space? The answer lies in the dynamic relationship between positive and negative charges. The positively-charged protons “pull” the negatively-charged electrons, and don't let them fly away.

But this leads to a perplexing question: What holds the protons together in the nucleus? They are all similarly charged positively, so why don't they push each other away? They should act like two magnets that repel each other when their northern (or southern) sides are held side by side! Why don't the protons do the same, thus possibly even causing the nucleus to explode?

The answer is that within the nucleus exists a very potent power known as the Strong Nuclear Force (one of the four basic forces in nature). This keeps all the protons together united in one bloc, preventing them from repelling each other and sending them off in different directions.

Hashem – the One, the Unifier – thus holds the entire universe together via the Strong Nuclear Force that unites the infinite number of protons in their nuclei. Hashem unifies all; He is the ultimate “Strong Force” without which everything would fall apart and turn into nothingness. This is “*Hashem is One.*”

■ Unity of Soul and Body

Though R. Akiva linked long life with unity, R. Nechunya took a different approach. In answer to the question of what he had done to deserve longevity, he said he conducted his life as follows: “I never received gifts, I was willing to forego my honor, and I gave in easily in monetary disputes.” What is the common denominator that links these three?

The answer is: Giving up on material ambitions in favor of spiritual pursuits. R. Nechunia reasons as follows: The soul is eternal and the body

is transient. To lengthen a body's life, it must be brought into sync with the ambitions of the soul. To this end, we must decrease the material drives and bring them more in line with what the spirit strives for – and this unity will bring long life.

This goal is attained by the three points that Rav Nechunya mentioned. Firstly, he did not accept gifts – for when one receives gifts, he accustoms his body to crave what does not belong to him, thus increasing the materialistic drives. By not accepting gifts, he brought these strivings more in line with his spiritual desires.

He said he also gave in on monetary disputes, because when one adheres to money and acts as if it were a part of his personality, this increases his materialistic side.

Similarly, the need for honor, the third aspect that Rav Nechunya ceded, and the inability to forego a slight to one's dignity, also increases one's ego and arrogance.

To be sure, there is no essential drawback in having wealth and property. The problem arises when one becomes addicted to a need for riches and prestige, and cannot separate himself from them even to perform deeds of kindness. But one who views his riches as a tool by which to help others less fortunate than him, can consider himself connected to the desires of the spirit – and thereby to the secrets of long life.

R. Nechunya strove, all his life, to give in on monetary matters, and not to stand on every penny. He also tried to give in when it came to his ego. And the crowning achievement was his custom not to accept gifts, thus fulfilling the verse, *“One who hates gifts will live.”* (Proverbs 15,27)

