



לעילוי נשמת
הרה"ת ר' מרדכי ליבע"ה
בן הרה"ת ר' חיים דובער ע"ה
חן
נפטר ז' ניסן ה'תש"פ

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משפחתו שיחיו

THE ANATOMY OF A CUSTOM

In the early common era, people were accustomed to greeting each other by invoking G-d's name. Why did they do so? Why is it no longer customary?

A fascinating look into the Jewish reactions to idolatry, Christianity and Islam.



JEWISH INSIGHTS

A TASTE OF THE REBBE'S TEACHINGS



SHAVUOT

Part 1: A G-dly Greeting

Source 1 Mishna Berachot 9:5

The Sages instituted that we greet each other with G-d's name, as the verse states: "Boaz arrived from Bethlehem. He said to the harvesters, G-d be with you, and they answered him, G-d bless you." Likewise, it says: "G-d is with you, mighty warrior."

And it says: "Do not scorn your elderly mother." And it says: "It is time to act for G-d—when they void your Torah."

וְהִתְקִינוּ, שְׂיִהָא אָדָם שׁוֹאֵל אֶת
שְׁלוֹם חֵבְרוֹ בְּשֵׁם, שְׁנֹאָמַר (רוֹת
ב,ד) וְהִנֵּה בְעֵז בָּא מִבֵּית לָחֶם,
וַיֹּאמֶר לְקוֹצְרִים יְיָ עִמָּכֶם, וַיֹּאמְרוּ
לוֹ, יְבָרְכֶךָ יְיָ. וַאֲמַר (שׁוֹפְטִים
ו,יב) יְיָ עִמָּךְ גִּבּוֹר הַחַיִּל.

וַאֲמַר (מִשְׁלֵי כג,כב) אֵל תְּבוֹז
כִּי זָקְנָה אִמָּךְ. וַאֲמַר (תְּהִלִּים
קִיט,קכו) עַתָּה לַעֲשׂוֹת לִי הַפְּרוּ
תּוֹרָתְךָ.

Source 2 Ruth 2:4

Boaz arrived from Bethlehem. He said to the harvesters, "G-d be with you!" They answered him, "G-d bless you!"

וְהִנֵּה בְעֵז בָּא מִבֵּית לָחֶם וַיֹּאמֶר
לְקוֹצְרִים ה' עִמָּכֶם, וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ
יְבָרְכֶךָ ה':

Source 3 Judges 6:12

An angel of G-d appeared to him and said to him, "G-d is with you, mighty warrior."

וַיֵּרָא אֵלָיו מִלְאָךְ ה' וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו
ה' עִמָּךְ גִּבּוֹר הַחַיִּל:

Source 4 Rabbi Ovadia of Bartenura

That we greet each other with G-d's name: It is not disrespectful to use G-d's name to show respect to a human being. We learn from Boaz, who said to the harvesters, "G-d be with you." You might ask: Perhaps Boaz did so on his own initiative and we mustn't learn from his example? The answer is: Take a lesson from the angel who said to Gideon, "G-d is with you, mighty warrior."

שיהא אדם שואל בשלום חברו בשם: בשמו של הקדוש ברוך הוא. ולא אמרינן מזלזל הוא בכבודו של מקום בשביל כבוד הבריות להוציא שם שמים עליו. ולמדו מבוועז שאמר לקוצרים ה' עמכם. וכי תימא בעז מדעתיה דנפשיה קעבד ולא גמרינן מיניה, תא שמע מן המלאך שאמר לגדעון ה' עמך גבור החיל.

>> The Rebbe

Why Don't We Do It?

The final Mishna in Tractate Berachot tells us: "The Sages instituted that we greet each other with G-d's name, as the verse states: Boaz arrived from Bethlehem; he said to the harvesters, G-d be with you, and they answered him, G-d bless you. Likewise, it says: G-d is with you, mighty warrior. And it says: Do not scorn your elderly mother. And it says: It is time to act for G-d—when they void your Torah."

The Talmud explains: "Why are additional verses cited? Because you may ask: Perhaps Boaz did so on his own initiative and we cannot learn from his example? The answer comes from the angel who used the same expression to Gideon: G-d is with you, mighty warrior."

The Talmud continues: "You may argue that the angel was not greeting Gideon at all. Rather, he was delivering a Heavenly message that G-d would be with him. Therefore, the Mishna cites the verse: Do not scorn your elderly mother. It means to say: Don't scorn Boaz and claim that he did so on his own initiative. Learn from Jewish elders; they are reliable sources."

However, the question arises: If we are supposed to greet each other with G-d's name, why doesn't Maimonides say so in his code of Jewish law?

Source 5 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De'ot 5:7

There is one source in Maimonides that might allude to this law. But at most, as the Rebbe explains in the next segment, he does so very vaguely.

A Torah scholar should not shout or shriek while speaking, like cattle and wild animals, nor should he raise his voice too much. Instead, he should speak gently to all people. And when speaking gently, he should take care not to stand at a distance, lest he seem haughty. He should always be first to offer greetings, in order to be well-liked.

תְּלַמֵּיד חֶכֶם לֹא יִהְיֶה צוֹעֵק וְצוֹחֵחַ
בְּשִׁעַת דְּבוּרוֹ כְּבַהֲמוֹת וְחַיּוֹת.
וְלֹא יִגְבִּיהַ קוֹלוֹ בְּיוֹתֵר אֶלָּא
דְּבוּרוֹ בְּנִחַת עִם כָּל הַבְּרִיּוֹת.
וְכַשֵּׁי־דָבָר בְּנִחַת יִזְהַר שֶׁלֹּא
יִתְרַחֵק עַד שֶׁיִּרְאֶה כְּדַבְּרֵי גֹסֵי
הַרוּחַ. וּמִקְדִּים שְׁלוֹם לְכָל הָאָדָם
כְּדִי שֶׁתִּהְיֶה רוּחַן נוֹחָה הַיְמִינוּ.

>> The Rebbe

Maimonides' Closest Mention

Maimonides does write that “A Torah scholar...should always be first to offer greetings, in order to be well-liked,” based on the words of the Talmud, “Abaye would often say: Seek to increase peace...among all people...so that you will be liked by all. It was said of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai that no one ever greeted him first.”

However, for the purpose of being well-liked, an ordinary greeting will suffice. A mention of G-d's name (*Elokim* or *Havaye*, the Tetragrammaton which spells the letters *yud–hei–vov–hei*) is not specifically necessary nor is it necessary to be a Hebrew greeting—*shalom*—which is, itself, one of G-d's names. People are well-received when they offer greetings in any language.

Indeed, the enactment recorded in the Mishna to mention G-d's name in a greeting is not at all associated with the desire to be well-received among people!

Part 2: A Time to Act

Source 6 Psalms 119:126

It is time to act for G-d—when they void your Torah.

Rashi

Our sages understood this to mean that we transgress Torah in order to safeguard Jewish observance, such as Gideon, as well as Elijah on Mount Carmel, who offered sacrifices outside of the Temple.

עת לעשות ליהוה הפרו תורתך:

רש"י על הפסוק

ורבותינו דרשו ממנו, שעוברין על דברי תורה, כדי לעשות סייג וגדר לישראל. כגון גדעון ואלהו בהר הכרמל שהקריבו בבמה.

Source 7 Shita Mekubetzes on Berachot 63a

It is time to act for G-d: Meaning, out of fear that G-d's name be forgotten and replaced with names of other deities, we permit the articulation of G-d's name in vain.

ואומר עת לעשות לה' וכו' - פירוש ומפני חשש שלא ישכחו שם שמים ויהא שם עבודת כוכבים שגור בפיהם אנו מתירין להזכיר שם שמים לבטלה:

>> The Rebbe

G-d's Special Name

We can explain it as follows:

The Mishna cited the verse, "It is time to act for G-d—when they void your Torah." The *Shita Mekubetzes* explains its meaning: "Out of fear that G-d's name be forgotten and replaced with names of other deities, we permit the articulation of G-d's name in vain." When the names of other deities became common-place due to negative influences, they permitted the articulation of G-d name to ensure that it not be forgotten.

This explains why the sages enacted the custom to greet others with G-d's name, and specifically the name of *Havaye* (just as Boaz had done with the harvesters). In order for G-d's name to become common-place, *shalom* won't suffice—despite the fact that it is also G-d's name. The name *Elokim* won't suffice either, because it could be misinterpreted as a reference to judges and also to nobles, as the verse says, “he carried away the *eili haaretz*, the nobles of the land.” It was necessary to spell out the name which describes G-d, and G-d alone: *Havaye*.

We can gain even more clarity from the comment of Rabbi Hai Gaon (printed in recent years from the Cairo Geniza): “When Christianity spread, the sages enacted that a person should greet others with G-d's name; they realized that it was necessary for people to hear G-d's name on a regular basis, because the Christians would greet each other by saying, ‘Blessed be the father, the son and the holy spirit’” — a reference to the Christian belief in the trinity. This explains why it was necessary for Jews to specifically articulate the name of *Havaye*, because only that would fulfill their goal to negate (all forms of idol worship, including) the trinity.

The was also true in the times of Boaz (who greeted his workers with G-d's name) and Gideon (who heard G-d's name from the angel). During the era of the Judges, according to the biblical account, pagan deities—*ashtarot*, *baal* etc.,—were widespread and their names were, no doubt, commonly mentioned. Therefore, it was necessary to add mentions of G-d's name as well.

Part 3: 'Progressive' Religions

>> The Rebbe

The New Religions Pave the Way for Moshiach

With the advent of Christianity, the mention of many deities became less commonplace, and with the advent of Islam, the Trinity became less commonplace as well. Therefore, this custom—which contradicts Torah law—is no longer necessary.

We can now explain why Maimonides does not cite this law.

To preface: In the end of his “Laws of Kings” (in early versions which were not subject to censorship, such as the Rome edition), Maimonides writes that “Ultimately, Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite who arose after him pave the way for Moshiach’s coming,” because now, “the entire world has been filled with the mention of Moshiach, Torah, and mitzvot...and they discuss these matters...”

In other words, according to Maimonides, the very fact that those religions discuss concepts like resurrection, and debate whether Torah’s commandments are still relevant is itself a preparation for the Messianic era.

This is also true about spreading monotheism throughout the world and combating idol worship. Christianity, despite being considered idol worship (according to Maimonides), nevertheless paves the way to monotheism, at least to a certain extent; the trinity has replaced a much wider variety of deities. The advent of Mohammed “the Ishmaelite” (hundreds of years later) furthered the cause even more; now, the names of deities are no longer commonplace, and even the trinity is no longer used in greetings.

Since When Does Judaism Abolish Traditions?

This explains why Maimonides does not cite this enactment in his code: Mentioning G-d's name in a greeting violates Torah law, especially according to Maimonides who rules that using G-d's name in vain is a Biblical prohibition. It was only permissible during "a time to act for G-d," when it was important to combat the influence of those who made commonplace mentions of deities. Once they ceased this behavior, the prohibition to mention G-d's name in vain reverts to its proper place, and we cannot include it in our greetings.

Therefore, Maimonides omits the Mishnah's ruling to offer greetings with G-d's name; to include it would imply that it was still relevant in his times, and in the days of Maimonides it was actually no longer permissible, because mentions of deities were no longer commonplace.

...We find a similar concept regarding idol worship: if a certain idolatrous behavior is not customary in a city or land, we do not enact extra prohibitions to negate it. For example, we customarily abstain from Torah learning on the night of Christmas (known as *nittel*), so as not to "add energy to the forces of impurity," but Sephardic Jews do not observe this custom (I once mentioned *nittel* to a Sephardic Jew, and he had never heard of it at all), because it is a custom associated with Christianity and Christian lands. In those places, it was necessary to prevent "holy energy" from slipping into impure forces—due to his connection to Torah learning as explained in history books and in the Talmud as well.

But in Muslim countries, like Morocco and Yemen, the custom of *nittel* was not practiced at all, and Torah learning was obviously permitted without question, because that specific deity had no sway in that country.

The same is true of our discussion: In the days of Maimonides, the mention of deities was no longer commonplace (with the advent of Islam etc.) and therefore, the custom to include G-d's name in greetings was abolished.

20 Kislev & Shabbos Vayeshev 1977

Kuntres 22 Shevat 5778 – Lahak Hanochos

מיזם של "משרד השלוחים"

נוסד בימי השבעה לזכרון ולע"נ הרב גבריאל נח וזוגתו רבקה הי"ד
שלוחי הרבי במומבאי, הודו

