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Author: Ruth A. Zlotnick

Title: "Into Your Hands I Entrust My Spirit":
The Origins of the K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah

Advisor: Dr. Lawrence A. Hoffman

Number of Chapters: This thesis has six chapters:

Chapter One:	Introduction
Chapter Two:	The Origins of the K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah
Chapter Three:	The Justification for K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah
Chapter Four:	The K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah in the Geonic Era
Chapter Five:	The Origin of the K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah and the Phenomenon of Sleep
Chapter Six:	Conclusion

The Goal of This Thesis:
In the course of this thesis, I trace the early development of the bedtime recitation of the sh'ma—from the earliest conflict about bedtime prayer between the schools of Hillel and Shammai; through the differentiation between the bedtime custom and the evening service during the amoraic era; through the codification of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah during the geonic era. I also explored the ways in which the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah reflects the physiology of sleep. The bedtime ritual expresses the vulnerability that accompanies falling asleep, and the awe of moving from one state of consciousness to another.

The Contribution of this this Thesis:
This thesis traces early liturgical development through the test case of one prayer rubric. It also attempts to address contemporary pastoral issues. For people seeking a Jewish spiritual path, some variation of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah might be a first step. In a culture where social and professional competition and individual bravado are valued, this prayer allows for a moment in the day when fear and vulnerability are acceptable emotions. Our culture also stresses the desire to remain "forever young," denying the reality of the aging process and of our mortality. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah provides a counter-cultural message, one that emphasizes the value of each day, and the reality of our transient lives.

The Sources I Used:
Mishnah Berakhot; Babylonian Talmud; Jerusalem Talmud; Midrash Tanhuma; Midrash Tehilim; Ozer Hageonim; Pirkei d' Rabbi Eliezer.

I also used a variety of *siddurim*, and a variety of other secondary source material.

"Into Your Hands, I Entrust My Spirit": The Origins of the K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah

Ruth Anne Zlotnick

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of
Requirements for Ordination

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New York, New York

March 1, 2001
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Acknowledgements

This thesis wouldn't have been completed without the keen support of many people in my life:

Thank you to my teacher, Dr. Lawrence Hoffman, whose writings inspired me long before I ever sat in his classroom. His ability to share the poetry he hears in Jewish liturgy led me to this topic. His encouraging words and wise counsel helped shepherd this thesis to completion. His generous spirit has offered me many other opportunities to explore the soul of Jewish prayer. To him, I am deeply grateful.

Thank you, too, to my close circle of family and friends. The road to rabbinical ordination is a long one. You have been my fellow travelers down that path, sheltering me or urging me further along, depending on my needs. I am very blessed, indeed.

This thesis is dedicated to two women in my life: To my grandmother, Ernestine Herman Gross, who died just before I entered rabbinical school; and to my mother, Susan Gross Zlotnick, who had a miraculous lung transplant in the middle of my studies.

To my grandmother, who taught me the blessing of dying with dignity; and to my mother, who continues to teach me the blessing of each new day of life. In the words of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah:

Blessed are You, Eternal One, who lays us down to peace, and raises us up to life.

Chapter One: Introduction

In his last collection of poems, the aging Yehuda Amichai reflects on his mortality. In the poem "In My Life, on My Life," he remembers the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah that he recited as a child:

> When I was a boy I said the bedtime prayer
> every night. I remember the verse
> "The angel who delivers me from all danger."
> I never prayed after that, not on my bed,
> not in the hills, not in war, not by day and not by night,
> but the delivering angel stayed by my side and became
> a loving angel. That loving angel will turn into the Angel of Death
> when the hour comes, but it is always the same angel
> who delivers me from all danger.[1]

Although he rejects the traditional Judaism of his parents, he retains powerful lessons from his early religious training. Somehow, the potency of his bedtime ritual continues to give him comfort into his old age. Somewhere in his psyche, he continues to feel protected by a beneficent angel, even when he has abandoned the experience of prayer altogether.

Amichai's poem speaks to the power of bedtime prayer. In a traditional Jewish home, an abridged version of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is the first prayer parents teach their children. Night time can be a period of great anxiety, a time in which children's fears are transformed into a belief in ghosts and bogeymen. The transition from a wakeful, conscious state to a dreaming, sleep state can be

1. Yehuda Amichai, *Open Closed Open*. (New York: Harcourt, Inc, 2000), 109

particularly provocative. Children are sensitive to the vulnerability of being pulled into the world of sleep. It is a time when they are acutely alone, outside the comforting presence of their parents. By teaching children the bedtime recitation of the sh'ma, parents convey the message that God will protect them from all danger.

Night time and the vulnerable experience of sleep evokes fears in adults, too. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah expresses the sense of defenselessness that accompanies falling asleep at night, and acknowledges a sense of awe that is inspired by our journey into the world of dreams. As a prayer rubric, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah has developed into a lengthy liturgical unit. Given the private nature of those moments before sleep, there are different versions of the bedtime custom in traditional prayerbooks. Yet, every version contains a few similar elements: an introductory blessing, known as the birkhat mapil; a recitation of the first paragraph of the sh'ma; and Psalms 3, 91 and verses from Psalms 4 and 31. These essential components to the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah are identified in the earliest rabbinic literature regarding the bedtime custom. In this thesis, I will examine the rabbinic and geonic literature regarding the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, in an effort to discover why the Rabbis identified the moments before sleep as a prayerful occasion.

The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah exemplifies early liturgical development, reflecting the concerns of the tannaim, amoraim and geonim. Some themes remained the same over time; others did not. Chapter two explores the origins of the bedtime recitation of the sh'ma, through an examination of excerpts from the

Mishnah and Talmud.[2] Within this chapter, I identify the ways in which the history of the bedtime custom coincides with the history of the evening service, and the ways in which the tannaim and amoraim distinguished the differences between these two liturgical moments. The two recitations of the sh'ma particularly demonstrate the ways in which the Rabbis differentiated between public and private prayer.

The Rabbis decreed that only the recitation of the sh'ma during the evening service fulfills an individual's halakhic obligation to recite the sh'ma at night. However, the bedtime custom of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah never ceased to be popular within the growing Jewish community. In chapter three I explore the tensions between the authority of legislated prayer versus the persistence of popular customs, especially with regard to the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. I identify texts from the Babylonian Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud, and various midrashic material which question the necessity for the bedtime recitation of the sh'ma. These texts articulate the rabbinic belief that the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah protects a sleeping person by deterring demons from wreaking harm. I conclude chapter three with an exploration of the rabbinic conceptualization of a spirit world populated by demons and angels.

By the geonic era, the conflict between the doubled recitation of the sh'ma at night was resolved. The geonim, instead, sought to standardize worship for the entire Jewish community, emphasizing the importance of Torah study within the

2. When referring to traditional texts, I use gender-specific language. This is in keeping with the concerns of the Rabbis and geonim. When referring to contemporary subjects, I use non-gender-specific language, thereby reflecting the contemporary value placed on both women's and men's experiences.

context of Jewish liturgy. In chapter four, I chart the development of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah during the geonic era, particularly as it is reflected in passages from *Seder Rav Amram*, geonic responsa, and Midrash Tanhuma. By the end of the geonic era, the essential components of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, as identified above, were established for subsequent generations.

Chapter five examines the origins of the bedtime sh'ma and the themes inherent in it, namely, how the early Rabbis understood their subconscious selves and the reality of their deaths. In it, I present conventional interpretations of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, and seek to expand upon them. These interpretations deepen the rabbinic analogy between sleep and death but, I believe, neglect the rabbinic justification for the bedtime custom, that is, that the sh'ma serves as protection for the individual from demons who rule the night.

I think there is great richness to the rabbinic conceptualization of the spiritual world. It is a prescientific acknowledgement that our conscious minds are limited in their perception of the world "out there." Using contemporary sleep research as a basis, I investigate the physiology of sleep and the way in which that experience is translated into the images of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. The Rabbis recognized that sleep propels human beings into another realm of existence, one that is equally "real" as the realm in which we conduct our daily, waking lives. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah describes how all realms of reality emerge out of, and exist within, the divine will of a loving God. Ultimately, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is an assertion of the sacredness of the *entirety* of our existence, our conscious and subconscious selves, our lives and our deaths.

In my conclusion, I suggest that the origins of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah can shed light on contemporary pastoral issues. A bedtime ritual of Jewish prayer can serve as a counterpoint to cultural messages that deny the reality of our mortality, and lessen the value of our relationships to others and ourselves. I identify contemporary liberal attempts to revise the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah and how these attempts might help people place their daily activities into a larger context of meaning. This ritual may be a first step for Jews who are more at home in an environment of American individualism than they are in the world of communal Jewish prayer. A revised k'riat sh'ma al hamitah can reinforce our sense of faith, so that we, like Yehuda Amichai, can feel a sense of deliverance from all danger both during our waking and sleeping lives.

Chapter Two: The Origins of the K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah

The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is a private prayer *par excellence*; there are few daily moments more intimate than the minutes prior to falling asleep. Stefan Reif observes, "By its very nature liturgy presents problems for the historian since novelty of practice is not only rarely acknowledged but also reinterpreted as established custom."[3] It is difficult to decipher the origins of public prayer, despite the rabbinic emphasis on communal worship; the task to decipher the private prayers of individuals is all the more difficult. In the case of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, we have textual evidence that the rubric has its origins in the Babylonian Talmud. The creation of this ritual is intertwined with the history of the evening service. A public evening service provided the opportunity for an individual to recite the sh'ma after sundown, thereby fulfilling his halakhic obligation; it might seem redundant to repeat the sh'ma at bedtime. However, the custom of reciting a prayer before sleep became a halakhic obligation incumbent on the individual, raising interesting questions about the rationale to legislate private prayer.

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3. Stefan Reif, *Judaism and Hebrew Prayer.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 354.

A. K'riat sh'ma al hamitah in the Mishnah and Talmud

The recitation of the sh'ma at night was a central concern for the early Rabbis. It is, in fact, the famous, pressing question with which the Mishnah opens, "From what time in the evening may the sh'ma be recited?"[4] This is quickly followed by an argument between the schools of Hillel and Shammai about the correct bodily position during the sh'ma recitation; here, we have the first textual hint that during the proto-rabbinic era the k'riat sh'ma was recited near the time of falling asleep.

בֵּית שַׁמַּאי אוֹמְרִים, בָּעֶרֶב כָּל אָדָם יַטּוּ וְיִקְרְאוּ, וּבַבֹּקֶר יַעֲמְדוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (דברים ו) וּבְשָׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמֶךָ. וּבֵית הִלֵּל אוֹמְרִים, כָּל אָדָם קוֹרֵא כְּדַרְכּוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר (שם) וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ. אִם כֵּן, לָמָּה נֶאֱמַר וּבְשָׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמֶךָ, בְּשָׁעָה שֶׁבְּנֵי אָדָם שׁוֹכְבִים, וּבְשָׁעָה שֶׁבְּנֵי אָדָם עוֹמְדִים.

The school of Shammai says: In the evening every person lies down and recites [it], but in the morning [each person] stands, as it is written "when you lie down and when you rise up." (Deuteronomy 6:7) But the school of Hillel says: each person recites [it] according to his own way, as it is written, "when you walk on your way." (Deuteronomy 6:7) If so, why is it written, "when you lie down and when you rise up"? [The proper time to recite the sh'ma] is at the hour when people lie down and the hour when the rise up.[5]

The Shammaite school believes that the Deuteronomy text not only commands the time of day in which the sh'ma must be recited, but also dictates the bodily position with which an individual must say the prayer. The Hillelite school

4. Mishna Berakhot, 1:1
5. Mishna Berakhot, 1:3

disagrees: for them, the Deuteronomy verse *only* establishes the proper time for the recitation of the sh'ma, and that time is "the hour when people lie down", that is, near the time when a person usually lies prone to fall asleep.

The requirement to recite the sh'ma near the time of sleep is ultimately fulfilled by the institution of the evening service. Yet, B. Berakhot 60b establishes the proper way to recite the sh'ma upon retiring for the night. Clearly, the institutionalized evening service did not put an end to the bedtime custom. The Talmud's description of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah appears in the middle of a chain of private blessings that recognize the inescapable, biological needs of the human body: going to the bathroom; falling asleep; waking up.[6] The sugya is a testament to the rabbinic affirmation of a need for prayer at this most private moment, when a person lies alone facing the darkness of sleep.

הנכנס לישון על מטתו אומר משמע ישראל עד והיה אם שמוע
ואומר ברוך המפיל חבלי שינה על עיני ותנומה על עפעפי
ומאיר לאישון בת עין יהי רצון מלפניך הי אלוהי שתשכיבני
לשלום ותן חלקי בתורתך ותרגילני לידי מצוה ואל תרגילני
לידי עבירה ואל תביאני לידי חטא ולא לידי עון ולא לידי נסיון
ולא לידי בזיון וישלוט בי יצר טוב ואל ישלוט בי יצר הרע
ותצילני מפגע רע ומחלאים רעים ואל יבהלוני חלומות רעים
והרהורים רעים ותהא מטתי שלמה לפניך והאר עיני פן אישן
המות ברוך אתה הי המאיר לעולם כולו בכבודו.

When a person goes to sleep upon his bed, he says from "Hear, O Israel" until "If, then, you obey the commandments." And he says, Blessed are you who casts down the cords of sleep upon my eyes and slumber upon my eyelids, and who illuminates the pupil of the eye. May it be Your will, Adonai,

6. Interestingly, the blessings to be recited upon awakening, directly following the birkhat mapil in this sugya, are included in the morning service. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will explore the connection between these two prayer rubrics.

> my God, that you lay me down to peace, and grant me my portion of Your Torah. Make me familiar with the power of your commandments, and do not allow me to be familiar with the power of transgression. Do not draw me into the power of sin, or the power of wrongdoing, or the power of tribulation, or the power of shame. Let the good inclination rule me, and do not let the bad inclination rule me. Rescue me from bad afflictions and bad diseases. Do not allow me to be alarmed by bad dreams and bad thoughts. May my offspring be perfect before You, and may you illuminate my eyes lest I die in sleep. Blessed are You, Adonai, who illuminates His entire universe with His glory. [7]

The sugya begins with the instruction to recite only the first paragraph of the sh'ma, differentiating it from the k'riat sh'ma of the morning and evening services. This is followed by the directive to recite the birkhat mapil, in which the biological urge for sleep is identified as an act of God. The blessing implicitly recognizes that individuals lose control over their mental and physical functions once they enter the state of sleep consciousness.

Phillip Birnbaum suggests that the phrase "המפיל חבלי שנה על עיני" is a reference not just to the eyes, but "the whole body, metaphorically represented as chained in sleep."[8] However, the focus on optical imagery is interesting because the prayer is bracketed by references to visual perception. In the introductory phrase, the sleep process is initiated by the eyelids being drawn to a close, as if they possessed cords that can be tied, immersing the individual in darkness. This suggests the first connection between consciousness and visual perception; the distinguishing factor between the states of sleep and wakefulness is the notion of light entering into the eye. The concluding phrase reinforces the optical imagery

7. B. Berakhot, 60b
8. *The Daily Prayer Book*, translated by Phillip Birnbaum. (New York: Hebrew Publishing Company, 1977), 776.

by the hope that God will "illuminate my eyes lest I die in sleep". In this phrase, life is identified with visual awareness, whereas the darkness of sleep suggests elements of death. This corresponds with the rabbinic dictum that "sleep is one-sixtieth part of death."[9] Finally, the idea of light illuminating human consciousness is expanded upon in the chatima, "Blessed are You, Adonai, who illuminates His entire world with His glory." One might expect the chatima to revisit the idea of sleep, not light and darkness, but the concluding theme of the birkhat mapil is the power of the Divine Presence to illuminate the state of sleep and even death where normal light is absent.

The blessing also expresses the hope for "my portion of Your Torah" and familiarity with the mitzvot. It is quite an extraordinary wish—even in sleep, the Torah scholar wishes to be engaged in talmud torah. The Torah seems to serve an apotropaic function, protecting the individual who wishes to be engaged in Torah even when he cannot fulfill his duties to study. The individual needs protection because of the loss of self-control that accompanies the experience of sleep; without the requisite consciousness, the uncontrolled brain may lead a person to transgress the mitzvot. The blessing lists the means by which these transgressions may occur in descending order of seriousness and human willfulness: "sin," "wrongdoing," "tribulation," "shame." In our waking hours we may be able to defend ourselves against these urges, but in the state of sleep no such defense is possible, the boundary lines of propriety may be violated.

Furthermore, the birkhat mapil requests protection from unexpected

9. B. Berakhot, 57b.

dangers external to the individual's will ("bad afflictions and diseases") and processes of the internal, subconscious mind ("bad dreams and thoughts.") Interestingly, the blessing does not mention dangers wrought by other human beings (or demons either, an issue I shall explore in chapter three); only those phenomena that occur *within* the individual are identified in this blessing, for example, mental disturbance or physical illness. Thus, on the simplest level of analysis, the birkhat mapil expresses anxiety about the loss of control that accompanies sleep. It specifically identifies two fears: The fear of being unconscious, signified by the inability to perceive light, bringing the individual close to the experience of death; and the fear of the vagaries of the yetser hara, leading to transgressions, subconscious thoughts and actions. Ultimately, that chatima indicates that these fears are assuaged by the omnipresent light of the Divine.

B. General Ideas about Early Rabbinic Liturgy

Reconstructing the rabbinic mindset is difficult, especially when the textual tradition contradicts itself, interweaves passages in and out of chronological order, sometimes gives voice to political debates, and, as a whole, is unsystematically compiled.[10] As Tzvee Zahavy has written, "as far as we know some Rabbis adhered to these rules [of halakha]. Some did not. They cared enough about the rules to dispute, debate, catalogue and canonize them."[11]

10. Reif, 88.
11. Tzvee Zahavy, "Three Stages of Development of Early Rabbinic Prayer," *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Intellect in Quest of Understanding. Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox,* Volume I. Edited by Jacob Neusner, Ernest S. Frerichs, Nahum Sarna. (Atlanta: Scholars

Despite the challenges, scholars have been able to piece together a coherent picture of the evolution of early rabbinic worship.[12] In many ways, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah reflects a particular picture of the early liturgical impulses of rabbinic Judaism.

Mishnah Berakhot, the earliest rabbinic evidence of a bedtime custom, is the product of a developmental process that spanned the first centuries of the Common Era, and is a primary source of our knowledge about tannaitic liturgy. Zahavy has identified three stages of tannaitic prayer[13]: The first stage, from which Mishnah Berakhot 1:3 may be traced, is identified by the schools of Hillel and Shammai, and has its roots in the last years of the sacrificial cult.[14] During this period, three groups influenced the nascent phenomena of rabbinic Judaism, the priestly and aristocratic class, the scribal profession, and the householders and landowners.[15] Mishnah Berakhot coalesces the concerns of these three groups into one document, often heralding the growing phenomenon of Torah study and its interpretation as an act of religious piety. By the end of this period, liturgy as such consisted of two components, prayer—that is, the sh'ma and the amidah—and the public recitation of the Torah.[16]

The second stage emerged after the cataclysmic destruction of the Temple, and is identified by the Rabbis of Yavneh. These rabbinic masters, such as

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Press, 1989), 234.

12. Reif, 89.
13. Here, Zahavy is building on the theories of Jacob Neusner, his teacher. See also Neusner's *From Politics to Piety: The Emergence of Pharasaic Judaism.* (New York: KTAV Publishing, 1979.)
14. Zahavy,234.
15. Zahavy, 236.
16. Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), 197.

Gamliel, Joshua and Akiva, "had to be more creative as innovators." They transformed old rituals to meet the new reality, helping the community cope with the destruction of their Temple and the tyranny of Roman rule.[17] It was also this generation, according to Abraham Goldberg, who began to transform an oral culture into a literary one. These Rabbis wrote down the teachings of earlier sages, thereby preserving traditions and centralizing the community; these teachings became the earliest strata of the Mishnah.[18] This generation of tannaitic Rabbis incorporated the formal recitation of the sh'ma into an identifiable daily liturgy.[19]

The third stage of early rabbinic history is the era of the Ushan masters, those who fled to the Galilean town of Usha after the Bar Kokhba revolt. These Rabbis, too, sought to preserve a community in crisis. For the Ushan masters, and their contemporaries elsewhere, "all of a person's meals, prayers, and other religious obligations comprise *parts of a larger system.*"[20] If the Yavnean masters were ingenious in their ability to preserve old forms and envision new forms of Jewish religious expression, then the Ushan masters transformed these various traditions into a coherent textual whole that could be handed down to subsequent generations, culminating in the formation of the Mishnah and other sources of tannaitic literature.

Thus, the early amoraim received a complete system of religious worship

17. Zahavy, 242.
18. Abraham Goldberg, "A Study Book of Halakha." *The Literature of the Sages*. Edited by Shmuel Safrai (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 216.
19. Zahavy, 249.
20. Zahavy, 255.

from their predecessors; a system, however, that was marked by great flexibility and creativity. According to Ismar Elbogen, the primary objective of the amoraic communities was to gather and assemble these existing forms of worship, and set them into fixed patterns of prayer, often lengthening the original liturgical rubrics.[21] It is during this era that the obligations of fixed, statutory prayer are identified in amoraic texts; for example, the amoraim formalized the voluntary evening service into a permanent part of the daily liturgy.[22] The growth of the Jewish community and the division of the community geographically, primarily in the land of Israel and Babylonia, led to the popularization of liturgy. No longer the sole possession of a small, scholarly elite, the amoraim sought to universalize prayer for the general Jewish community, often using the actions of Torah scholars as models of pious behavior.[23]

This trend toward universalization produced another hallmark of amoraic liturgy: an emphasis on communal worship by including "all members of the community."[24] The center for communal worship, the synagogue, grew increasingly important, and the rules that applied to synagogue worship were applied to worship elsewhere. For example, if an individual was unable to join the community in the synagogue at the appropriate fixed time for prayer, then it was his responsibility to recite the prayers at the same hour, thereby remaining

21. Elbogen, 205
22. Elbogen, 85.
23. Elbogen, 211.
24. Elbogen, 205. Also , Jakob Petuchowski, "Some Laws of Jewish Liturgical Development." *Studies in Modern Theology and Prayer.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998.) Of course, given the status of women, "all members of the community" is an inaccurate phrase.

symbolically connected to the larger group.[25] In the synagogue, ten men completed a quorum, and a special prayer leader, the shaliach tsibbur, emerged to speak to God on behalf of the whole community.[26] Clearly, this is an effective strategy for unifying a community that is fragmented and redefining itself.

Despite the emphasis on communal values, however, the public nature of amoraic liturgy did not undermine the critical role of the individual. In the rabbinic imagination, the communal relationship with God, and therefore the fate of Israel, is dependent on each individual's relationship with the Divine. One of the avenues toward strengthening this relationship is prayer. Prayer, even public prayer, must in some way be private, expressing the genuine intentions of the individual; as Lawrence Hoffman notes, "a prayer...is not really a prayer until I, the worshiper, usurp it as if it were my own."[27] For the amoraim, the goals of worship emphatically cannot be accomplished without the active participation of the individual. As Eugene Borowitz further explains, for the early Rabbis:

> nothing happens in the service which the man who has come to pray does not himself bring about. The fixed order of the prayers, the leadership of respected figures, the communion with neighbors, the special room devoted to worship of God—all these may help. They may be invaluable to the individual, evenly humanly indispensable. They remain means, instruments, accessories. They cannot take the place of the individual's own action, his turning to God in attentive respect.[28]

25. Elbogen, 206.
26. Elbogen, 376.
27. Lawrence A. Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 7.
28. Eugene Borowitz, "The Individual and the Community in Jewish Prayer." *Gates of Understanding*, Volume I. Edited by Lawrence A. Hoffman. (New York: Central Conference of American Rabbis, 1977), 56.

Outside formal public worship, the amoraim recognized that there are moments in an individual's life, which are worthy of liturgical expression. Because of the difficulty of legislating an individual's actions outside the purview of the community, a distinction emerged between public, obligatory prayer and private, voluntary prayer. According to the text of B. Berakhot 60b, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah falls into this latter category.

C. Elements of Private Prayer in the Talmud

In order to understand the development of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah within the context of the Babylonian Talmud, it is helpful to explore the parameters of non-statutory prayer. Joseph Heinemann draws a sharp distinction between public and private prayer. In the process of defining their various components, he suggests that non-statutory prayer is a unique liturgical category, somewhere in the "middle ground between private prayer on the one hand, and statutory public prayer on the other."[29] He delineates five types of non-statutory private prayer: spontaneous prayer of the individual; routine (but non-statutory) prayer of the individual; statutory prayer of the individual; spontaneous public prayer; public prayer that is not statutory and is not fixed.[30] The amoraic emphasis on communal prayer circumscribed the area of public fixed prayer as the only area that warrants the legislation of halakha. Some of the prayers that fall under the category of non-statutory prayer eventually were considered obligatory; the

29. Joseph Heinemann, *Prayer in the Talmud*. (New York: Walter de Gruyter,1977), 156.
30. Heinemann, 156.

status of other prayers have never been determined.[31]

The category of non-statutory prayer presents a challenge to Heinemann, the consummate form critic, because it is marked by "a great deal of flexibility, lack of uniformity, clarity and precision in the matter of form."[32] Some characteristics of non-statutory prayer include: no mention of the divine name or kingship in blessings, or deviation from the normative pattern in other ways; the use of more than one theme within the scope of an opening or closing blessing; the use of private petitions in the opening formula; the incorporation of the phrase "May it be Your will"; and the use of the first person singular.[33] Some prayers that obviously fall within the discrete category of private prayer, like the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, also fall into this "middle ground" of non-statutory prayer.

The category of non-statutory liturgy in the talmud exposes the weaknesses of a form critical analysis. Because it embraces so many different kinds of prayers, non-statutory prayer cannot be identified with any sort of "pure" form. Still, as Heinemann himself notes, "We must recognize that the very lack of uniformity and standardization which we find in the area of private prayers and its neighboring areas is one of the most fundamental characteristics of this genre."[34] That is, the talmudic approach to this category of prayer is open and fluid. This in itself reveals an interesting characteristic of private prayer in the talmudic era: There are moments that were understood to be worthy of blessing outside the sphere of fixed, public liturgy—in the case of B. Berakhot 60b, this includes

31. Heinemann, 158.
32. Heinemann, 158.
33. Heinemann, 181-9.
34. Heinemann, 178.

moments when the body gives way to biological needs—and the ways in which those moments may be addressed are open to personal preferences.

Thus, according to the sugya under discussion, the need to sleep at night reminds human beings of their dependence on their Creator, and is properly acknowledged through a blessing. In the characteristically compact style of the talmud, B. Berakhot 60b simply states, "When a person goes to sleep upon his bed, he says...;" the sugya does not explicitly identify whether this blessing is a voluntary act or a halakhic necessity. Using Heinemann's definition, the birkhat mapil meets many of the qualifications for private, non-statutory prayer, several themes are addressed within the context of the prayer; also, there are expressions of personal petitions within the prayer; there is the use of the phrase "May it be Your will"; and the first person singular tense is used throughout the blessing. Accordingly, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah exemplifies the emergence of non-statutory customs within rabbinic liturgy.

D. The Development of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah

Zahavy suggests that one of the influential groups during the first century of the Common Era was the scribal class, a distinct faction of literate people from a variety of social classes. He argues that the recitation of the sh'ma as a daily religious practice gained greater significance, especially after the destruction of the Temple, because it was the "primary ritual" of the scribal profession and its supporters. This group embraced liturgy explicitly based on Torah as a means of conferring importance on their profession and creating a need for their

transcription skills.[35] Zahavy bolsters this argument by looking at texts from the Gospel of Mark, in which Jesus recites the sh'ma in a debate with scribes; from phylacteries discovered at Qumrun; and from the Nash Papyrus, a document dated from 150 B.C.E. that contains the Decalogue and the first two verses of the sh'ma.[36]

No doubt, the starting point of reciting the sh'ma at bedtime is quite early in Jewish history, long before the scribes began to assert their influence. In fact, Josephus claims that the custom of recalling the liberation from Egypt at bedtime began as an instruction of Moses at Sinai:

> Let every one commemorate before God the benefits which he bestowed upon them at their deliverance out of the land of Egypt, and this twice every day, both when the day begins and when the hour of sleep comes on, gratitude being in its own nature a just thing, and serving not only by way of return for past, but also by way of invitation of future favors.[37]

The authenticity of the source is spurious; Josephus is undeniably claiming ancient origins to legitimate current practices. However, the fact that he refers to a bedtime ritual which has origins beyond living memory does suggest that this custom was in existence prior to the early rabbinic era. It is interesting that he does not identify the sh'ma *per se*. Also, the rationale he gives for the bedtime recitation differs from the one cited in the talmud text. In Josephus, an individual

35. Tzvee Zahavy, "The Politics of Piety: Social Conflict and the Emergence of Rabbinic Liturgy." *The Making of Jewish and Christian Worship*. Edited by Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991), 48.
36. Zahavy, "Three Stages of Development of Early Rabbinic Prayer," 238.
37. Flavius Josephus, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. Translated by William Whiston, A. M. (Auburn & Buffalo: John E. Beerdsley, 1895), Book 4, Chapter 8:13.

remembers God's role in history only out of a sense of deep gratitude. Nonetheless, the theory that the bedtime custom began long before the rabbinic era is supported by *The Letter of Aristeas*, a document dated from 200 B.C.E. in which there is a description of the practice of meditation and recitation of the sh'ma before lying down to sleep.[38]

Elbogen maintains that the service has its origins in this private, bedtime ritual that was promulgated "everywhere" by the beginning of the Common Era. The ritual was popular, he claims, because of the "natural need" for night prayer, that is, human beings experience deep-seated fears in the darkness of nightfall. It is "natural" to want to petition God for protection during this dangerous time.[39] In the wake of the fragmentation of their community, however, fixed, public worship became more popular and normative. The evening service was established and appropriated the need for a bedtime ritual. However, unlike the morning and afternoon services, which were institutionalized during the era of the sacrificial cult, the evening service was voluntary, and of lesser importance, as evidenced by the lack of repetition by the shaliach tsibbur during the amidah.[40] By the amoraic era, "the evening service was elevated to the status of public service, and was recited immediately upon nightfall. Consequently, a second recitation of the sh'ma before bedtime was prescribed. In this way a new nighttime prayer was conceived, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah."[41] B.Berakhot 60b is the textual witness to this innovation.

38. *Elam Talmud*. Translated by Rabbi Ehrman. (Jerusalem: Elam Press, 1965), 68.
39. Elbogen, 85.
40. Elbogen, 85.
41. Elbogen, 206.

As with much of amoraic liturgy, rather than choosing between two prayer units, the Rabbis mandated both.[42] The general rule about the recitation of the sh'ma at night became twofold: an individual should recite the sh'ma *both* communally in the evening service, and again later on, privately, when lying down to sleep. Reif suggests that this offers a resolution to the debate contested between the schools of Hillel and Shammai. By incorporating the sh'ma into the required liturgy of the evening service, the opinion of Beit Hillel is followed—the sh'ma is said at the appropriate time, that is, "the hour of lying down". By reciting the sh'ma again while lying on one's bed, the opinion of Beit Shammai is followed—it is said when one is *literally* lying down, ready to fall asleep.[43]

42. Jakob Petuchowski, "Some Laws of Jewish Liturgical Development." *Studies in Modern Theology and Prayer*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 154.
43. Reif, 108.

Chapter Three: The Justification for K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah

By the end of the amoraic era, the Rabbis established both the recitation of the sh'ma during the evening service, and a voluntary bedtime ritual which includes the recitation of the sh'ma and the introductory birkhat mapil. The matter may seem to end there, but the doubling of a recitation of the sh'ma in the evening raises several questions. Most notably, *why* did people persist in reciting the sh'ma at bedtime, even when the evening service had been established? The popularity of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah seems to demonstrate the power of folk custom over regulating legislation—the need for bedtime prayer in the amoraic era emerged out of the contemporary belief that at night, while asleep, the soul of the individual may be endangered by night demons.

A. Justification for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah: The Babylonian Talmud

The question of the underlying motivations for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is addressed in B. Berakhot 4b and 5a. The issue is introduced at the bottom of B. Berakhot 4b:

> א"ר יהושע בן לוי אע"פ שקרא אדם ק"ש בביהיינ מצוה לקרותו על מטתו אמר רבי יוסי מאי קרא רגזו ואל תחטאו אמרו בלבבכם על משכבכם ודומו סלה. אמר רב נחמן אם תלמיד חכם הוא אין צריך אמר אביי אף תלמיד חכם מיבעי ליה למימר חד פסוקא דרחמי כגון בידך אפקיד רוחי פדיתה אותי הי אל אמת.

> Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Although a person recites the sh'ma in the synagogue, it is a mitzvah to recite it on his bed. Rabbi Yose asks, what is the scriptural verse? "Tremble and do not sin. Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be silent. Selah." (Psalm 4:5) Rav Nahman said if a person is a talmud scholar there is no need [to recite the sh'ma]. Rabbi Abaye said: Even [for] a talmud scholar it is necessary to say [at least] one verse of [God's] mercy, such as "Into Your hand, I entrust my spirit, Adonai, God of truth." (Psalm 31:6)[44]

This short passage is classically talmudic, attributing a scholarly debate among teachers whose lives did not intersect. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi raises the central issue: He uses the language of religious obligation, mitzvah, to describe the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. He emphasizes that this obligation exists *even if* an individual has recited the sh'ma at the synagogue during the fixed time of the evening service. Yehoshua ben Levi was a first generation amora who lived in the important cultural center of Lod.[45] He was one of the most eminent teachers of his generation in land of Israel, known in particular for his "saintliness".[46] Yehoshua ben Levi's assertion that the bedtime sh'ma has halakhic implications is challenged by the question of scriptural support. The text suggests that the tradent is appropriately attributed to Rabbi Assi, which follows because he was a third generation amora, and sometimes is identified as Rabbi Yose. He was born in Babylonia and studied there with Rabbi Samuel, then moved to Palestine and studied with Rabbi Yochanan.[47]

The sugya uses Psalm 4:5, "Tremble and do not sin. Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be silent," as a prooftext for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah.

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44. B. Berakhot, 4b-5a
45. H. L. Strack and G. Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*. Translated by Markus Bockmuehl. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991)92.
46. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*, (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1996), 49.
47. Strack and Stemberger, 98.

As Rashi explains, the phrase within the Psalm verse, "בלבבכם", "upon your hearts", signals a connection to the phrase within the sh'ma itself, "בכל לבבך", "with all your hearts"; that is, for the amoraim, "communing" with your heart indicates what a worshiper experiences when he recites the sh'ma. The rest of the verse, "על משכבכם", "upon your beds", suggests that the recitation should be done at the time of sleep; in fact, Rashi underscores this point by instructing the reader to quickly fall asleep after reciting the sh'ma. Taken in the context of the entire psalm, this verse reinforces the themes of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, that is, the omnipotent and omniscient God protects people, even when they are defenseless and in the vulnerable state of sleep.[48] Thus, the anonymous editor of the talmud presents a debate between two generations of amoraic teachers, representing both major centers of Jewish life in the late 3rd century, Palestine and Babylonia. According to Israel Ta Sh'ma, B.Berakhot 4b implies that the custom of k'riat sh'ma al hamitah was widespread throughout the Jewish world.[49]

The text continues with an argument between Rav Nachman and Rabbi Abaye. Rav Nahman claims that a Torah scholar need not recite the sh'ma at bedtime, while Rabbi Abbaye claims that even a Torah scholar must say at least "one verse" of scripture before falling sleep. The two opinions are differentiated by the level of Divine protection a Torah scholar receives from his studies; can he rely on the words of Torah he studied earlier in the day, or is it necessary to utter

48. For example, the concluding verse of the psalm is "In peace, I lie down and sleep, for you alone, Adonai, keep me secure."
49. Israel Ta Sh'ma, *Minhag Ashkenaz Hakdmon* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1992), 312.

scripture just before falling asleep? These tradents follow chronologically from the previous ones: Rabbi Nahman is a 3rd century Babylonian sage; Abbaye, on the other hand, was a 4th generation sage who was the leader of the academy in Pumbedita. His opinions, with the opinions of Rabbah, are the "culmination" of talmudic dialectics, and represent a turning point in Torah scholarship.[50]

The sugya proceeds with an exegesis of Psalm 4:5, ""Tremble and do not sin. Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be silent. Selah." This passage exemplifies the associative nature of talmudic inquiry; it is connected to the previous passage by a verse of scripture, but digresses from the legalistic discussion of the bedtime sh'ma. However, this digression begins to intimate the larger purpose of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah:

> א"ר לוי בר חמא אמר ר"ש בן לקיש לעולם ירגיז אדם יצו טוב על יצר הרע שנאי רגזו ואל חטאו. אם נצחו מוטב ואם לאו יעסוק בתורה שנאמר אמרו בלבבכם אם נצחו מוטב ואם לאו וקרא קריאת שמע שנאמר על משכבכם אם נצחו מוטב ואם לאו יזכור לו יום המיתה שנאמר ודומו סלה..
>
> Rabbi Levi bar Hama said [in the name of] Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish: A person should stir up his good inclination against his bad inclination, as it is written, "Tremble and do not sin." If he succeeds it would be preferable, but if not, he [should] occupy himself with Torah, as it is written, "Commune in your hearts." If he succeeds it would be preferable, but if not, recite the sh'ma, as it is written, "On your beds." If he succeeds it would be preferable, but if not he should remember the day of his death, as it is written, "And be silent. Selah."[51]

The analysis on of the verse hinges on the Hebrew root ר.ג.ז; in the פיעל form it

50. Strack and Stemberger, 104. Also, Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*, 46.
51. B. Berakhot 5a

means to tremble, but in the הפעיל form it means to stir up, or to be angered by. The passage therefore identifies a basic understanding of human nature: human beings cannot blindly rely on their good inclinations in the constant struggle with temptation, as personified by the yetser hara and the yetser hatov. Thus, the sugya suggests a plan in successive steps, using different techniques to strengthen the yetser hatov, depending on the the individual. Those steps include: Torah study, the bedtime sh'ma, and contemplation of one's mortality. When a person sleeps at night, he is defenseless against the yetser hara and needs special assistance to guard against its temptations. The sugya also conveys the correlation between sleep and death within the rabbinic mindset.

After another short teaching by Rabbi Levi bar Hama, the special virtues of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah in defeating the dangers that lurk in the night are extolled:

> א"ר רבי יצחק כל הקורא ק"ש על מטתו באלו חרב של שתי פיות בידו שנאמר רוממות אל בגרונם וחרב בפיפיות בידם מאי מ sh'ma אמר מר זוטרא ואיתימא רב אשי מרישא דענינא דכתיב יעלזו חסידים בכבודירננו על משכבותם וכתיבבתריה רוממה אל בגרונם וחרב פיפיות בידם. ואמר רבי יצחק כל הקורא ק"ש על מטתו מזיקין בדילין הימנו שנאמר ובני רשף יגביהו עוף ואין עוף אלא תורה שנאמר התעיף עיניך בו ואיננו ואין רשף אלא מזיקין שנאמר מזי רעב ולחומי רשף וקטב מרירי.
>
> Rabbi Yitzhak said: Anyone who recites the sh'ma on his bed is as if he holds a double-edged sword in his hand, as it is written, "With lofty praise for God in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands." (Psalm 149:6) What is the scriptural support [that this refers to the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah]? Mar Zutra said, and some say Rav Ashi, [it is supported] from the beginning of this passage, as it is written "let them

> shout for joy upon their couches." (Psalm, 149:5) And it is written afterward, "With lofty praise for God in their throats and two-edged swords in their hands." And Rabbi Yitzhak said: Anyone who recites the sh'ma on his bed, demons flee from him. As it is written, :Just as sparks rise in flight." (Job 5:7) There is no "flight" except for Torah, as it written, "Your eyes fly on it, and it is gone." (Proverbs 23:5). There is no "spark" except for demons, as it is written, "Wasting famine, and ravaging plague." (Deuteronomy 32:24)[52]

Here, the talmud presents a second attribution from the early amoraic era. Rabbi Yitzhak, renowned for his aggadic imagination, lived and worked in Tiberias, and thus represents the Palestinian tradition, but he also studied in Babylonia.[53] In this sugya he presents two explanations for the necessity of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, with specific prooftexts to support his argument.

First, he straightforwardly asserts that the bedtime sh'ma offers protection for the worshipper; it is no less than a "double-edged sword", as indicated by Psalm 149:5. The anonymous editor challenges this prooftext, and responds by interweaving the teaching of the late amoraic era, attributed to Mar Zutra or Rav Ashi. According to this teaching, the bedtime sh'ma is said to ward off danger in the night. The second teaching by Rabbi Yitzhak clarifies two aspects of this idea. He identifies the method through which the individual is protected, Torah study; and he labels the particular danger from which an individual must be protected, demons. The spiraling quality of talmudic discourse emerges: This idea of the protective nature of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is elaborated through a prooftext from Job, which is, in turn, understood through the use of two other prooftexts, from Proverbs and Deuteronomy. In the Torah text the words for plague, רשף,

52. B. Berakhot 5a
53. Strack and Stemberger, 98.

and deadly pestilence, קטב מרירי, are sometimes personified as deities who wreak havoc on human lives through plague and pestilence, an image borrowed from neighboring Near Eastern cultures.[54] According to the sugya, these words name the specific demons who rule the night and from whom an individual needs protection.

Taken together, these verses build the central justifying argument for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah—an individual must recite the sh'ma prior to sleep to ward off demons waiting to tempt the yetser hara. By saying the sh'ma, an individual recites verses of Torah, which clearly serve an apotropaic purpose. Therefore, it may be unnecessary for a Torah scholar to recite the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, given his studies during the day, because he is already steeped in scripture.

B. Justification for the K'riat sh'ma al hamitah: The Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Tehilim

The notion that the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is an obligation that carries the weight of the mitzvot is corroborated in parallel texts from the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Tehilim. Like the references to the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah in the Babylonian Talmud, the text from the Jerusalem Talmud is based on the first Mishnah regarding the appropriate time for recitation of the sh'ma at night. The Babylonian Talmud uses the language of obligation when discussing the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, but it clearly does not recognize this prayer rubric as a

54. Jeffrey Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 309.

substitution for the recitation of the sh'ma during the evening service. The text from the Jerusalem Talmud, however, conflicts with this idea and places greater significance on the bedtime ritual. The Jerusalem Talmud text suggests that an individual fulfills his halakhic obligation to recite the nightly sh'ma *only* when he is alone on his bed and about to fall asleep, thereby contradicting the amoraic emphasis on communal prayer.

> תני הקורא את sh'ma בבית הכנסת בשחר יצא ידי חובתו בערב לא יצא ידי חובתו מה בין הקורא בשחרית ומה בין evening ר" הונא בשם רב יוסף מה טעם אמרו אדם צריך לקרות sh'ma בביתו בערב בשביל להבריח המזיקין.
>
> It is taught: One who recites the sh'ma in the synagogue in the morning, fulfills his obligation [to recite the sh'ma]; in the evening, he does not fulfill his obligation [to recite the sh'ma.] What is the difference between the one who recites [the sh'ma] and the one who recites [the sh'ma] in the evening? Rabbi Huna said in the name of Rav Joseph, "What is the reason the say a man must recite the sh'ma in his house in the evening?" In order to chase away the demons.[55]

This passage is quite explicit: Even if an individual has participated in a public recitation of the sh'ma at nightfall in a synagogue, he does not fulfill his halakhic obligation until it is recited again privately on his bed. Given the introductory phrase, תני, we know the opening statement is a baraita. Like the passage from B. Berakhot 4b and 5a, this passage reflects an early understanding of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. This passage continues with an attribution to a third generation amora, Rav Huna, in the name of a second generation amora, Rav Yoseph.[56] These texts demonstrate that the community in the land of Israel and the

55. Jerusalem Talmud, 1:1
56. Steinsaltz,

community in Babylonia shared traditions. In the Babylonian Talmud, the protective powers of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah are extolled, but are identified as a byproduct of the act of recitation, "And Rabbi Yitzhak said: Anyone who recites the sh'ma on his bed, demons flee from him." Conversely, in this passage of the Jerusalem Talmud, the emphatic obligation to recite the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is precisely "in order to chase the demons." That is, one recites the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah *because* demons flee at the sound of words of Torah, thereby safeguarding the individual.

This idea is supported by a similar text in Midrash Tehilim. According to William Braude, this collection of midrashim was compiled around the 13th century, but it incorporates texts that were in circulation for many centuries prior to its codification. The collection "grew by accretion" from the 3rd to the 13th centuries.[57] Originally, the psalms were an important part of Shabbat homilectics in the land of Israel during the amoraic era; therefore, this text represents primarily the teachings of the Palestinian amoraim.[58] Not surprisingly, the text under consideration is an interpretation of Psalm 4:5, the same text that is used as scriptural support for k'riat sh'ma al hamitah in B.Berakhot 4b.

> sh'ma k'riat רגזו ואל תחטאו אמרו בלבבכם...תנן הקורא בבית הכנסת שחרית יצא ידי חובתו, evening לא יצא חובתו אלא אם חוזר ומתפלל בביתו. מה טעם כדי להבריח את המזיקין מו הבית.
>
> "Tremble and do not sin. Commune with your heart upon your bed"...It

57. *The Midrash on Psalms*, William G. Braude. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), xxxi.
58. Strack and Stemberger, 351.

> is taught that he who recites the sh'ma in the synagogue during the morning service has fulfilled his obligation. In the evening service, he has not fulfilled his obligation except if he returns and prays in his home. What is the reason [for this]? In order to chase the demons from his home.[59]

This supports the statement in the Jerusalem Talmud in which the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah releases an individual from the obligation to recite the sh'ma at night. In fact, the introductory phrase used in this midrash, תנן, sometimes introduces a baraita[60]; thus, Midrash Tehilim suggests that in the earliest rabbinic formulation of nighttime rituals, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, took precedence over the evening service. It certainly demonstrates, as Braude posits, that "prayer in the community is important, but prayer itself—the individual seeking God—is most important."[61]

The theme inherent in B.Berakhot 4b and 5a, are reiterated in the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Tehilim: The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah carries the weight of a halakhic obligation; only in these texts, it carries *more* weight than the k'riat sh'ma of the evening service. Furthermore, these texts suggest that the bedtime sh'ma is significant within the liturgy because it acts as a protection from the demons of the night. The two texts, Midrash Tehilim and the Jerusalem Talmud, also agree in their explanation of *how* the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah achieves this goal: The potency of the words of the Torah chases demons from the house.

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59. מדרש תהילים. 4 מזמור, 9 פרק.
60. Yithak Frank, *The Practical talmud Dictionary*. (Jerusalem: Ariel, United Israel Institutes, 1994), 264.
61. Braude, 73.

C. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah: The power of minhag to determine halakha

These various texts express the ways in which the tannaim and amoraim conceptualized the onset of nightfall, the experience of sleep, and the bedtime ritual of k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. The sh'ma was a fixture of rabbinic liturgy, in part because it had been a component of the sacrificial cult during the Second Temple era.[62] The early use of the sh'ma in public liturgy may have reinforced the "national character" of the early Jewish communities.[63] Furthermore, after the Temple was destroyed, the significance of the sh'ma was reinterpreted and transformed by the tannaim. Zahavy suggests that one of the hallmarks of rabbinic piety is the belief in the special power of the words of Torah:

> In the context of their rules for the standardization of this liturgy, the Yavnean attitude towards prayer was that the proper recitation of the sh'ma affords protection to an individual and, the converse of this claim, one who recites the wrong way risks exposing himself to danger...Their rules regarding the recitation of the liturgy pay little attention to the internal state of mind of the person who recites the liturgy. The Yavnean rules for reciting the sh'ma, for instance, mainly focus on external aspects of the recitation. In this era of transition under Roman domination the Rabbis sought to establish some stability and shelter in their local communities by means of prayer and ritual. [64]

Thus, liturgy became the means through which the early Rabbis sought to create a sense of security in their lives. The recitation of the sh'ma does not protect the individual through magic; rather, through the power from the Creator of the universe to whom all prayers are addressed. This is, perhaps, what Rabbi Yitzhak

62. Mishna Tamid 5:1
63. Elbogen, 180.
64. Zahavy, "Three Stages of Early Rabbinic Prayer," 250.

(B.Berakhot 5a) intended when he suggested that the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is a "double-edged" sword. Moreover, in the conflict between Rav Nahman and Rav Abbaye in B.Berakhot 5a, we learn that some early Rabbis embraced a belief in the cumulative effect of Torah study as a means of self-protection. This idea will be examined and expanded upon in the geonic texts which I shall discuss in the following chapter.

In B.Berakhot, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah carries the weight of a mitzvah, but not as a substitution for the evening service. In the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Tehilim, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah takes precedence over the recitation of the sh'ma in the public service in the synagogue. Both sets of texts concur that the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is necessary to chase demons from the house. Why are demons identified in these texts as the danger from which individuals must be protected during the night? Ta Sh'ma asserts that once the custom of the recitation of the sh'ma at bedtime was established, it became increasingly popular and inspired "the halakhic masters to designate for it a recognizable place in their writings."[65] That is, the fear of demons provided an explicit justification for the seemingly redundant ritual of a second recitation of the sh'ma at bedtime.

Ta Sh'ma builds his argument upon the work of Louis Ginsberg. Ginsberg concludes that the standardization of the evening service was quite late and Babylonian in origin. Thus, the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash Tehilim reflect the Palestinian custom of reciting the sh'ma at bedtime, a custom which is justified by the language of halakhic obligation. Ginsberg strengthens his

65. Ta Sh'ma, 312.

argument by exploring a teshuva of Hai Gaon. The teshuva responds to a question regarding the sh'ma recitation during the evening service: What happens if an individual recites the sh'ma prior to the appearance of stars in the sky? What is the order in which the amidah is recited and is it necessary to repeat the sh'ma?

> רבנן דארץ ישראל הכין עבדין. מצלו של ערבית [היינו שמונה עשרה] ובתר הכי קרו ק"ש בזמנה. ולא איכפת להו למיסמך גאולה לתפילה בערבית ואנן הכי הזינן דק"ש בעונתה טפי עדיף.
>
> This is how the Rabbis do it in the land of Israel. They pray the evening service [for us the Shemona Esreh] and after recite the sh'ma in its time. And it does not matter to them to connect the Geulah to the Tefilah of the evening service. And we prefer to recite the sh'ma in its proper time and to connect the Geulah to the Tefilah.[66]

Thus, this responsum demonstrates that as late as the medieval era, the practice of the evening service—that is, the public recitation of the sh'ma and amidah—differed in the land of Israel and in Babylonia, suggesting a flexibility and lack of standardization of the evening service. For the community in the land of Israel, the sh'ma was best recited "in its time," that is, close to sleep. Clearly, this bedtime custom maintained its popularity despite the emergence of the evening service.

Based on this evidence, Ginsberg proposes that the original evening recitation of the sh'ma was recited *only* at home by the individual. However, as the evening service travelled throughout the Jewish world, it was embraced in geographic locales in which the sh'ma of the evening service was recited much

66. As quoted in Ta Shma, 314. See also אוצר הגאונים, יט:11.

earlier than the hour of sleep. Therefore, he concludes:

> In the early days, much before the evening service spread, people recited the evening sh'ma on their bed, that is to say, close to sleep, just as the k'riat sh'ma of the morning is near rising at the hour of dawn. Afterwards, they had the custom of evening and they prayed it at the synagogue with the sh'ma and its blessings. The custom of sleep and the k'riat sh'ma did not move from its place, and the generations afterward forgot the origination of this custom. They found a reason for it and said it was "to chase the demons." [67]

He suggests that we do not have a similar remnant custom in the morning because the halakhic time to recite the morning sh'ma and the "natural" time to awaken coincide with one another, that is, at sunrise.

Therefore, the amoraim created the rationale of shooing away demons as a means to justify a second recitation of the sh'ma in the evening. This justification allowed the rabbinic scholars to maintain the popular k'riat sh'ma al hamitah without undermining the emergent halakhic importance of the evening service. Ta Sh'ma expands this idea by demonstrating that the halakhic judgment regarding the sh'ma, especially as it is represented in B.Berakhot 5a, does not differ between the Babylonian and the Palestinian amoraim; they both see it as a legal obligation. However, B.Berakhot 5a does not specify the level of halakhic obligation, but it does connect k'riat sh'ma al hamitah with the notion that it is a form of protection from demons. Ta Sh'ma concludes that the principle recitation of the sh'ma at bedtime is perceived in the Babylonian Talmud as an anachronism, and its central role in the liturgy is usurped by the earlier recitation of the sh'ma during the evening service. Still, the editors of the Talmud could not

67. Ta Sh'ma, 315. See also אוצר הגאונים, יט:11.

disregard the ritual altogether because it continued to be a popular folk custom.[68] Consequently, the evening liturgy was set and justified through the language of halakhic obligation. It included both a public recitation of the sh'ma, in accord with the legal obligation to recite the sh'ma at night, and an individual bedtime ritual, which was understood as a protective technique from dangers inherent in the sleep process.

D. Demons in the Rabbinic Imagination

The significance of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah cannot be understood without exploring the rabbinic conceptualization of night time, and especially the belief in spiritual beings who preside over the darkness. "Night time in particular is spirit time," writes Joshua Trachtenberg.[69] The domain of night is raised to the level of symbol; it represents the shadowy realm inhabited by our fears of real and fantastical danger. These dangers are often addressed by folk customs and superstitions, those popular expressions of religious belief that do not necessarily conform with the official tenets of the religious leadership.[70] Thus, although an individual's halakhic obligation to recite the sh'ma is fulfilled through the evening service, the power of a bedtime ritual persisted throughout the rabbinic era, carried by the weight of popular conceptions and fears about demons.

According to Trachtenberg, the Jewish community of the tannaitic and amoraic period imagined a highly elaborate supernatural cosmos in which

68. Ta Sh'ma, 315.
69. Joshua Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition: A Study in Folk Religion.* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1939), 46.
70. Trachtenberg, 24.

demons, angels, and spirits of all kinds reside. It was "a vast, teeming 'middle world', a world neither flesh nor altogether and exclusively spirit."[71] This is corroborated in B.Berakhot 6a, in a baraita attributed to Abba Binyamin:

תניא אבא בנימין אומר: אלמלי נתנו רשות לעין לראות אין
כל בריה יכולה לעמוד בפני המויקין.

That is, "if only the eye were given permission to see," teaches Abba Binyamin, "no creature would be able to stand before the demons." Therefore, one goal of ritual is to acknowledge the reality of the spirit world that pervades the known world yet remains undetectable to sensory perception.

Trachtenberg posits that the folklore and rituals surrounding the activities of the creatures that rule the night served a dual purpose: First, they assisted the Jewish community in exerting a sense of control during the period of the day in which they were most powerless, namely, during the hours of sleep. Second, the folk customs offered a means toward self-protection, a way in which people gained security against the forces that may endanger them.[72] In the rabbinic literature regarding the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah there is "no attempt to disguise" the purpose of the nocturnal ritual: The power of the words of the sh'ma serves to siphon the strength from the demons who inhabit the night and may cause harm to human beings.[73] The demons are disarmed by the worshiper's relationship with God, the source of all protection, the one Being stronger than the demons who seek to wreak havoc in the world.

71. Trachtenberg, 25.
72. Trachtenberg, 26.
73. Trachtenberg, 156.

The tannaim and amoraim envisioned two kinds of supernatural beings; the demons who wreak havoc, and the higher form of non-corporeal creatures, angels. Angels are an elevated form of being, closer to the divine, with foreknowledge of the future.[74] Within the rabbinic imagination, the danger of demons and the virtues of angels are enhanced for human beings during sleep, because in this state of unconsciousness, the soul temporarily exits the body, leaving it open for attack.[75] "While the body is asleep the spirit or soul leaves its corporeal prison and wanders over the face of the earth, reporting back its experiences to the sleepless mind."[76] The supernatural realm where angels, demons, and the souls of the dead reside and interact with one another is the realm that human beings can access through dreams. Therefore, sleep is seen as a journey wrought with danger, and worthy of prayer prior to embarking on that passage into the next realm.

E. Angels in the Rabbinic Imagination and in the K'riat sh'ma al hamitah

Although the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is recited explicitly to chase away demons, the role of angels in securing the safety of a sleeping individual is important also. In the rabbinic mindset, angels provide assistance for human beings, both as representatives in the heavenly courts, and as guides on the earth

74. Trachtenberg, 30.
75. Trachtenberg, 46. Clearly, this coincides with the rabbinic idea that sleep is a foretaste of the experience of death, when the human soul departs the physical body until the advent of the Messiah, when the just shall be resurrected. This connection between sleep and death will be re-examined in the final chapter of this thesis.
76. Trachtenberg, 234.

below.[77] The early rabbinic belief system was built upon late Second Temple angeology; it is first articulated in the book of Daniel in which angels are individualized and endowed with particular roles.[78] Several beliefs about angels proliferated throughout the rabbinic Jewish world; namely, angels were considered intermediaries between human beings and God; there were numerous individual angels who each had their particular sphere of influence; and angels watched over human beings during the routine activities of daily life.[79] By the end of the amoraic era, the role of angels in connecting human beings with the divine was fully articulated. As Trachtenberg explains:

> Angels were the mechanism through which God maintained a close contact with His universe. But these angelic intermediaries could carry messages both ways and the ancient practice of calling upon the angels rather than God directly in prayer became very widespread during this period. Indeed the whole force of the mystical movement which stressed secret values hidden in the letters and the words of liturgy was directed toward bringing into rapport the angels who could most effectively reach the ear of the heavenly court.[80]

Therefore, the power of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah lay in part in its ability to summons the appropriate guardian angels to assist human beings in transferring from an awakened state to a state of sleep. Also, dreams, the entree for human beings into the realm of spiritual beings, were sent through the intermediacy of angels. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah as it appears in the Babylonian Talmud does not explicitly identify the angels who guide an individual into the realm of sleep,

77. Trachtenberg, 69.
78. Trachtenberg, 71.
79. Trachtenberg, 71.
80. Trachtenberg, 76.

but in a later addition the four archangels Michael, Gabriel, Uriel and Raphael, as well as the Shekinah, are called upon to protect the worshiper. In this component, the archangels are summoned to guard the worshiper:

> בשם הי אלוהי ישראל: מימיני מיכאל, ושמואל גבריאל, ולפני אוריאל, ומאחורי רפאל, ועל ראשי שכינת אל.
>
> In the name of Adonai, God of Israel: o my right, Michael; to my left, Gabriel; before me, Uriel; after me, Raphael; and above my head, the Shekinah of God.

Trachtenberg suggests that this statement is a Jewish version of a Babylonian incantation.[81] In fact, a similar passage appears in *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer*, as a description of the throne of the Holy One.

> ארבע כתות של מלכי השרת מקלסין לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא. מחנה ראשונה של מיכאל מימינו, מחנה שניה של גבריאל משמאלו, מחנה שלישית של אוריאל מלפניו, מחנה רביעית של רפאל מלאחריו, ושכינת של הקדוש ברוך הוא באמצע והוא יושב על כסא רם ונשאת גבוה ותלוי למעלה באויר.[82]
>
> Four classes of ministering angels make praises before the Holy One , blessed be He. The first camp is [that of] Michael, to His right; the second camp is [that of] Gabriel, to his left; the third camp is [that of] Uriel, before Him; the fourth camp is [that of] Raphiel, behind him, and the Shekinah of the Holy One blessed be He, is in the middle. And He sits on the throne high and exalted, lifted high and hanging from above in the air.

The folk custom to recite the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah was not concerned solely with the purpose of chasing away dangerous night demons. The unspoken goal of

81. Trachtenberg, 156.
82. *Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer.* Chapter 4. (Jerusalem: Eshkol Publiching Company, 1973) 12.

the bedtime ritual was to summons angels to aid in the sleep process. By reciting the bedtime prayer, an individual articulated hope for a safe return from the world of dreams, a journey during which his soul separated from his body. Therefore, by the end of the rabbinic era, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah was a liturgical expression of the belief that the universe contains levels of reality beyond the five senses and conscious thought.

Chapter Four: The K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah in the Geonic Era

During the early middle ages, the geonim formalized the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah into the daily liturgy.[83] At the same time, the geonim established the central role of the Babylonian approach to Torah study. Different trends evolved: For the amoraim, the primary goal of the bedtime ritual had been to protect the worshiper from demons. For the geonim, on the other hand, the primary goal of the ritual was to provide the worshiper with an opportunity for talmud torah. The geonim did not abandon the older belief in demons; however, they intensified a belief in the potency of the words of Torah. They believed the very words of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah were a means to access the power of God's presence in the world. *Seder Rav Amram,* excerpts from geonic responsa, and a parallel text from מדרש תנחומה, all exemplify this developmental process of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah.

A. K'riat sh'ma al hamitah: *Seder Rav Amram*

Seder Rav Amram is written as a responsum to the growing Jewish community in Spain, instructing them on the entirety of Jewish worship. The *Seder Rav Amram* is the major textual source for understanding the role that the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah played in the geonic era. As Hoffman notes, "Though

83. Reif, 147.

Amram purports to be the chief author of the prayer manual, he quotes several of his geonic predecessors with regularity, so that his *Seder Rav Amram* is a fine compendium of geonic opinion generally, from the advent of Yehudai Gaon (757-761) until Amram himself (858-871)."[84] In regard to the bedtime custom, Amram bases his opinion on the material from the Babylonian Talmud. For Amram, the question contested in the amoraic literature—whether or not the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah challenges the halakhic status of the evening service—is not a pressing issue. The primary concern for him is the question regarding the necessity for a talmid chakham to recite the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. He also incorporated new elements into the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, including additional prayers that are not included in the amoraic texts.

In the opening sentence of commentary, Amram assumes the obligation for reciting the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah:

וכשיבנם אדם לישן על מטתו צריך לקרות ק"ש.

That is, "when a person lies down to sleep he needs to recite the sh'ma." Amram substantiates this claim by presenting the foundational text for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah in B. Berakhot 4b: "Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Although a person recites the sh'ma in the synagogue, it is a mitzvah to recite it on his bed. Rabbi Yose asks, what is the scriptural verse? "Tremble and do not sin. Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be silent. Selah." (Psalm 4:5)" Amram summarizes the talmudic view regarding the necessity for a talmid chakham to recite the sh'ma upon falling asleep, emphasizing the Babylonian value of talmud torah. In

84. Lawrence Hoffman, *The Canonization of the Synagogue Service*. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 16.

the conflict between Rav Nachman and Rabbi Abaye, Amram holds Abaye's position, neglecting to even mention Nachman's opinion that "if a person is a talmud scholar there is *no need* [to recite the sh'ma]"[85].

> ותלמיד חכם כיון שכל היום עוסק בתורה ומשכים ומעריב אין צריך לומר ק"ש אבל אומר פסוק זה בידך אפקיד ין הימנו.
>
> When a talmid chakham has been occupied with Torah [study] from early morning to nightfall, he does not need to recite the sh'ma, but he says the verse [quoted in B. Berakhot 5a] 'Into Your hand, I entrust my spirit.' (Psalm 31:6)

Therefore, Amram emphasizes the importance of Torah study prior to falling asleep. According to this passage, what constitutes "occupying oneself with Torah" is either recitation of the actual words of Torah as they occur in the sh'ma, or through day-long Torah scholarship. Regardless of how an individual occupies himself with Torah during the day, he must recite some words of scripture at night, namely a verse from psalm 31 identified as a פסוק דרחמי. This verse, the original inspiration for Adon Olam, is mentioned in the B. Berakhot 4b as a voluntary part of the bedtime custom; by Amram's time it is a permanent part of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah.

In the same spirit of winnowing the talmudic text, Amram concludes the discussion on the efficacy of talmud torah by interweaving only the last segment of the sugya from B. Berakhot 5a. Amram completely omits the passage from this sugya in which the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is described as a "double-edged"

85. B.Berakhot 5a

sword, a special form of protection. Also, he offers a variation of the analogy of Job 5:7 to the beneficial effects of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah[86]:

> And Rabbi Yitzhak said: Anyone who recites the sh'ma on his bed, demons flee from him. As it is written, :Just as sparks rise in flight." (Job 5:7) There is no "spark" except for demons, as it is written, "Wasting famine, and ravaging plague." (Deuteronomy 32:24) There is no "flight" except for Torah, as it written, "Your eyes fly on it, and it is gone." (Proverbs 23:5). [87]

Thus, in a departure from the talmudic text, "demons" are identified *prior* to "Torah". Unlike some of their modern descendents, the geonim saw no contradiction between the rational activity of scholarship, and the non-rational belief in the spirit world. The geonim were not afraid to conceptualize a cosmos in which non-corporeal beings possess a realm of their own.

This prooftext reinforces the primacy of the words of Torah over the need for an apotropaic charm at night. Given the rabbinic abhorrence of magic, Amram emphasizes the power of study over the power of verbal incantation. Amram ignores the passage in B. Berakhot 5a (k'riat sh'ma al hamitah as a "double-edged sword") that emphasizes the act of reciting the k'riat sh'ma as prayer. By omitting this teaching from his responsum, Amram averts any hint that he endorses magic. Amram concerns himself with the benefits of Torah study only. He will expand on this theme at the end of his exposition on the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah.

The following section of Amram's responsum instructs the general reader on how to perform the ritual. It is based on the sugya regarding the k'riat sh'ma al

86. The text in its original form can be found in Chapter Three.
87. B. Berakhot 5a

hamitah in B.Berakhot 60b:

> וקורא פרשה ראשונה מן שמע עד והיה אם שמוע וקורם k'riat
> ה יברך לקבל מלכות שמים שלמה.
>
> He reads the first section from "Hear O Israel" to "If, then, you obey the commandments." Prior to the recitation he blesses on completely receiving the kingship of heaven.

Here, Amram repeats the instruction for a bedtime recitation of the sh'ma as it appears in B.Berakhot 60b, that is, an individual should only recite the first paragraph of the sh'ma. The recitation of the sh'ma at bedtime is a mitzvah and therefore requires a blessing preceding it. Still, because this recitation differs from the k'riat sh'ma in the public synagogue services, the preceding blessing differs, too. Amram instructs the worshipper to say a blessing that recognizes the wholehearted embrace of God's sovereignty.

The bedtime custom as it appears in the *Seder Rav Amram* continues to correspond with the talmudic text. However, the beginning section of the birkhat mapil differs slightly from the version in B. Berakhot 60b, and overall the version in Amram's responsum is somewhat shorter than the talmudic version:

> אחריה מברך ברוך אתה ה' אמ"ה המפיל חבלי שינה על עיני
> ומשקיע שנת תרדמה על עפעפי ומנוחה על אישן בת עין
> ושמרני כאישן בת עין יהי רצון מלפניך הי אלוהי שתשכיבני
> לשלום ותעמידני לשלום ותתן חלקי בתורתך ותרגילני לדבר
> מצוה ואל תרגילני לדבר עבירה ואל ישלוט בייצר הרע
> ותצילני מפגע רע ומחלאים רעים ואל יבהלוני חלומות רעים
> והרהורים רעים ותהא מטתי שלמה לפניך והאר עיני פן אישן
> המות ברוך אתה הי המאיר לעולם כולו בכבודו.

> Afterwards he blesses: Blessed are You Adonai, King of the world, who casts down the cords of sleep upon my eyes and and sets down sleep upon my eyelids, and rest upon the pupil of the eye. He guards me as the pupil of the eye. May it be Your will, Adonai, my God, that you lay me down to peace, and raise me up to peace. Give me my portion of Your Torah. Make me familiar with the matters of your commandments, and do not allow me to be familiar with the matters of transgression. Do not draw me into the power of sin, or the power of tribulation, or the power of shame. Let the good inclination rule me, and do not let the bad inclination rule me. Rescue me from trouble and bad dreams. May my offspring be perfect before You, and may you illuminate my eyes lest I die in sleep. Blessed are You, Adonai, who illuminates His entire world with His glory.

The themes that are expressed in the birkhat mapil of the Babylonian Talmud are highlighted in this version, too: The worshiper petitions God for protection when he is most vulnerable, in the unconscious state of sleep. Again, optical imagery permeates the blessing, identifying awakened consciousness with the visual perception of light. In an interesting play of images, in this version of the blessing the worshipper desires protection from God as an eye is protected within a person's head, "He guards me as the pupil of the eye." Not only does the worshipper request to fall asleep in peace, but, unlike the talmudic text, Amram's version also requests to "rise up in peace," perhaps indicating a symbolic shift in the purpose of the prayer. Otherwise, although there are slight emendations in the wording of the text, the themes and ideas of the blessing are identical to the version of birkhat mapil as it appears in B. Berakhot 60b.

The following section of *Seder Rav Amram* adds an innovation to the bedtime custom:

> ואומר ברוך ה' ביום ברוך ה' בלילה ברוך הי בשכבנו ברוך הי
> בקומנו ויאמר ה' אל השטן "יגער וכו'" ה' ישמרך מכל רע

ישמור את נפשך ה' ישמור צאתך ובואך מעתה ועד עולם
בידך אפקיד רוחי וכו' יברכך ה' וישמרך וכו'.

> And he says: Blessed is Adonai by day; Blessed is Adonai by night. Blessed is Adonai when we lie down; Blessed is Adonai when we rise up. And Adonai said to Satan, "Adonai rebuke you," etc. [Zecharia 3:2] May Adonai guard you from all evil, and he will guard your soul. "Adonai will guard your going and your coming from now until eternity." [Psalm 121:8] "Into Your hand, I entrust my spirit, etc." [Psalm 31:6] "May Adonai bless you and keep you, etc" [Numbers 6:24-26]

After the recitation of the birkhat mapil the *Seder Rav Amram* instructs the individual to recite another blessing, one that Elbogen has identified as an early version of the השכיבנו.[88] The appearance of this blessing corroborates the belief that the השכיבנו originated as a bedtime prayer. As Elbogen states:

> [This is] a night prayer. One series of verses definitely relates to a petition, whether preceding or following, for God's protection at night; this can be seen clearly in the arrangement of the material in Maimonides. This nighttime prayer would have had no connection to the Evening Service itself. It would be a late composition from the time when the Evening Service was held just after nightfall, and would have been introduced as a nighttime prayer to be said just before going to sleep.[89]

Therefore, by the geonic era the question of the appropriateness of two nighttime rituals had been resolved, allowing the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, and its new innovative additions, to meet the special needs of bedtime.

Through an additional string of verses, the overt connection between sleep and death became a focus of the bedtime ritual. The first verse is from Zecharia in which God reproves Satan. There is an assumed relationship between this verse

88. Elbogen, 89.
89. Elbogen 89.

and the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah: The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah can deter night demons just as God deters the Adversary. Furthermore, in B.Berakhot 51a, Zecharia 3:2 is described as a formula for defense against the Angel of Death. This section of Amram's commentary concludes with two verses from Psalms and the birkhat cohanim both of which fall under the category of verses that express God's mercy, פסוקי דרחמי, as identified in B. Berakhot 4b. This emphasizes the idea that divine compassion expedites the safe transition to the death-like experience of sleep.

Amram prefers to underscore the importance of talmud torah instead of focusing on the strength of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah to scare away evil spirits. This is well demonstrated in his final thoughts regarding the appropriate custom of reciting the sh'ma at bedtime. It is not the sh'ma itself that protects an individual, but rather a שיר של פגעים, a collection of psalms that comprise a formula to scare evil spirits. This defensive device is described in B.Shavuot 15b, and is established by Amram as another foundational source for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah:

> ר' יהושע בן לוי היה אומר יושב בסתר עליון ונאני תנו רבנן שיר של פגעים בכנורות בתופים ובנבלים ואי זהו שיר של פגעים יושב בסתר עליון עד כי אתה ה' מחם' וגו' ואומר ה' מה רבו צרי רבים קמים עלי עד לה' הישועה ואמרינן ר' יהושע בן לוי מסדר להו להני קראי ונאני ומקשינן היכי עביד הכי והאמר ר' יהושע בן לוי אסור להתרפאות בדברי תורה להגן שאני וכתוב באגדא שיר של פגעים היה משה אומר בשעה שהיה עולה לרקיע היה אומר מזמור הזה יושב בסתר עליון.

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would say "He who dwells in the secrets of

> the Most High," (Psalm 91:1) and fell asleep. Our Rabbis taught: [this is] the song [against] evil spirits with lutes, timbrels, and lyres. And which is the song [against] evil spirits? "He who dwells in the secrets of the Most High," until "Because you are Adonai—my refuge, etc." (Psalm 91:9) And he says: "Adonai, how many are they that trouble me and rise up against me," (Psalm 3:2) until "Salvation is Adonai's," (Psalm 3:9). And we say that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi arranged them for [his] benefit, recited [them] and fell asleep. And so we compare, how did he do this? Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, "It is forbidden to heal oneself with words of Torah; [for] defense is a different matter. It is written in the aggadah: Moses would say the song [against] evil spirits at the moment when he would rise to the firmament, saying the psalm, "He who dwells in the secrets of the Most High."

The framework of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah has been expanded throughout this responsum by Amram. First, he included the פסוקי דרחמי not as a substitution for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah (as it had been suggested in the talmudic text), but as an additional component. Now, another method of protection during sleep is incorporated into the bedtime custom, the שיר של פגעים, or songs against evil spirits.

Here, Amram introduces the sugya from B.Shavuot 15b in which verses from psalms 3 and 91, identified as שיר של פגעים, are integrated into the nighttime prayer ritual. The text as it appears in Amram differs from the text in B. Shavuot 15b. In the talmudic text, the teaching on שיר של פגעים does not follow directly from the teaching about Rabbi Yehoshua be Levi's bedtime practices. Also, the talmudic text does not suggest that Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi "arranged" the verses for the bedtime ritual. Perhaps Amram possessed a variant version of Shavuot 15b, or, perhaps, Amram cleverly edited the sugya, along with aggadic material to strengthen the bedtime custom as he understood it.

Psalm 91 extols the power of God to protect a human being:

> You will find refuge under His Wings,
> His fidelity is an encircling shield.
> You need not fear the terror of the night...
> A thousand may fall at your left side,
> ten thousand at your right, but it shall not reach you.
> He will charge his angels for you, to protect you in all ways.

Amram explains that this is a psalm of Moses, "as it is written in the agaddah." This text is found in מדרש תהילים, in which Moses blesses the Israelites and, according to the midrash, sings psalm 91 upon seeing the Tabernacle.[90] Psalm 3 identifies God's restorative powers: "I lie down and sleep and wake again, for Adonai sustains me. I have no fear of the myriad forces arrayed against me on every side" He continues his commentary by concluding with the teaching of Yehoshua ben Levi regarding the forbidden use of Torah as a method for healing or magic. Although an individual may not use words of Torah for healing purposes, they may be used for "defense"; that is, these verses can be recited *prior* to becoming ill or receiving a wound, and thereby prevent an individual from endangering his health. Taken as a whole, Amram's instruction regarding the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah concretizes and expands the ritual as it appeared in the Babylonian Talmud.

B. K'riat sh'ma al hamitah: A Geonic Responsum

An anonymous responsum helps to clarify how the geonic perception of

90. In his later commentary, Rashi also asserts that psalm 91 was sung by Moses.

the bedtime ritual refers to the obligation of talmud torah. Like *Seder Rav Amram*, this responsum also engages the sugya in B.Berakhot 4b in which there is a difference of opinion between Rabbi Abbaye and Rav Nachman. In his responsum, Amram sides with Abbaye and neglects to mention Nachman's view. The responsum, on the other hand, integrates the two views, harmonizing them into one opinion:

> ות"ח פטורין לקרוֹת קרית sh'ma על מיטתן דכד אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק ת"ח אינו צריך טעם ברור אמר בה מה טעם חייבין לקרות ק"ש על מיטתן כדי שיקיימו בשכבך ובקומך ת"ח ודאי כיון שתמיד עוסק בתורה אין חייבין זהלכה כרב נחמן בר יצחק דאתא ליה אביי ולא חלק עליו אלא אמר בה מילתא אחריתי וצריך למימר פסוקי דרחמי והקורא לא אטרחוהו רבנן לישב על הקרקע אילא על מיטתו שכך אמ' חכמים צריך לקרות על מיטתו ואתא רב אסי ואסמכה אקרא רגזו ואל תחטאו מה טעם כדי לקיים ובשכבך
>
> A talmid chakham is exempt from reciting the sh'ma on his bed. When Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said that a talmid chakham does not need [to recite it], the reason that he said this is clear: What is the reason a person is obligated to recite the sh'ma on his bed? In order to establish [the mitzvah of studying Torah] "when he lies down and when he rises up." Since a talmid chakham is daily occupied with Torah, he is not obligated [to recite the sh'ma upon his bed]. The halacha is according to Rav Nachman. Abbaye came and did not argue with this, rather he said another word: One needs to say a verse of [God's] mercy. The Rabbis were not troubled by the reciting [it] on the ground, but rather [did so] on the bed. Thus, he [Abbaye] said "The wise need to recite on their bed." And Rav Assi came and connected this with reciting "Tremble and do not sin. Commune with your heart upon your bed, and be silent. Selah." (Psalm 4:5). What is the reason? In order to establish [the mitzvah of studying Torah] "when he lies down."[91]

91. אוצר הגאונים, יח:10.

In a broad stroke, this geonic text presents the seemingly opposing views of Rav Nachman and Rabbi Abbaye: The halacha follows the opinion of Nachman, a Torah scholar is not obligated to recite the bedtime sh'ma if he has been occupied during the day with Torah study. This is because the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah fulfills the requirement of the first paragraph of the sh'ma, to teach Torah when "you lie down and when you rise up." Therefore, this responsum claims that rather than contradicting Nachman, Abbaye offers a supplementary opinion: An individual should say a verse of God's mercy and this may be recited while an individual lies upon his bed.

The responsum includes a prayer recited by some "men of this generation", that is subsequently rejected as unnecessary and identified as a ברכה לבטלה:

בא"י אמ"ה אקב"ו על קרית שמע ולהמליכו באהבה.

> Blessed are You, Adonai, our God, King of the world who sanctifies us with His mitzvot and commands us to recite the sh'ma and enthroning us with love.[92]

This blessing suggests that there were a variety of blessings that introduced the bedtime ritual. The blessing mentioned in this responsum is not acceptable because it expresses a desire to fulfill the commandment to recite the sh'ma, and the talmudic sources have already firmly established that k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is not the recitation of the sh'ma that fulfills an individual's nightly obligation.

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92. אוצר הגאונים, יט:11.

Therefore, the responsa rejects this blessing because it is considered to be a blessing said in vain.

C. K'riat sh'ma al hamitah: A Parallel Text in Midrash Tanhuma

The blessing that has been rejected corresponds to a passage from מדרש תנחומה in which the midrash uses the same terminology of "enthroning" or "crowning" God through the words of the k'riat sh'ma. Originally scholars believed that the material gathered in מדרש תנחומה was geonic in origin; now they believe that the material was compiled as early as the fifth century.[93] It demonstrates the power of the words of Torah to protect an individual at bedtime. Within the larger context, this passage discusses the special role of the descendents of Jacob or Israel:

> הרי הן ישנים מן התורה ומן המצוה עמדו משנתן עומדים באריות חוטפים ק"ש וממליכים להקב"ה נעשין אריות מפליגין לדרך ארץ למשא ומתן. אם נתקל אחד בכלום או אם מחבלין באו ליגע באחד מהם ממליך להקה"ה לא ישכב עד יאכל טרף כשהוא אומר ה' אחד נאכלין המחבלין מפניו. מלחשין אחריו בשכמל"ו ובורחין. והוא נסמך בזכות ק"ש משומרי היום לשומרי הלילה.

> Behold, there are those who go to sleep within Torah and mitzvot. They get up from their sleep and arise like lions who snatch the [words of] the k'riat sh'ma and enthrone the Holy One, Blessed be He. They are made like lions and jump to their everyday activities and business. If one [of Israel] stumbles on something or if demons come to trouble one of them, this one [Israel] enthrones the Holy One, blessed be He. "He [Israel] does not lie down until he eats his prey" (Numbers 23:24) and when he says "[God is] One" the demons will be eaten before him. They whisper after him, "Blessed be God's glorious name and kingdom

93. Strack and Stemberger, 240.

> forever" and they flee. He connects the merits of the sh'ma to the guardian of day and night.[94]

This passage highlights the inventive literary play of midrash. The text is part of a longer homily on the Torah portion concerning Balaam and Balak. The redactor skillfully sews together a verse from Numbers, using it to instruct the reader on the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. The preceding biblical verse, Numbers 23:23, is a polemic against magic: "Lo, there is no augury in Jacob/No divining in Israel/Jacob is told at once/Yea, Israel, what God has planned." By using Numbers 23:24 in the midrashic text, the redactor negates the power of magic and asserts the power of Torah. It may *seem* that the words of Torah have diminished the demons' power, but really, the source of protection emerges from the Divine. This idea is stressed in the clever detail of the demons, weakened by the first words of the sh'ma, responding with the second line referring to God's limitless power. The demons have no choice but to flee from the presence of the worshiper. Taken as a whole, this midrash supports the geonic material in which the power of the bedtime ritual emerges from the depth of an individual's study of "Torah and mitzvot."

D. K'riat sh'ma al hamitah: Liturgy in the Geonic Age

By the early middle ages the approach to liturgy had changed and prayer was firmly identified as an essential element in the daily life of every Jew.[95] As Reif notes, for the geonim "the stress is rather on finding all manner of

94. מדרש תנחומה פרשה בלק.
95. Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 5.

justifications—historical, philosophical, and halakhic—for the central role of prayer."[96] Elbogen clarifies how this process of justifying worship practices emerged over time:

> At first prayer was governed by only the few fixed rules and binding institutions (halakha) in the Mishnah and Talmud...Ancient traditions were handed down from generation to generation but did not have the force of law. In some cases the tradition about such customs became uncertain with the passage of time but were honored as handed down in each congregation and were allowed to stand if any justification at all could be found. But in the course of time it developed that practices long considered customary had acquired a fixed form and binding character. Thus something that was customary in one place on the basis of an ancient tradition could come into conflict with a custom that had acquired legal status somewhere else, and it even occurred that customs supplanted institutions that had been fixed as law (מנהג מבטל הלכה).[97]

The prominence of local customs that appeared throughout the newly expanding Jewish communities in the mid-East and Europe, however, became an anathema to the Babylonian geonim.[98] The concretization of liturgy during the geonic era emerged from the necessity to centralize these diverse customs. The geonic authorities sought to use their influence to standardize worship to conform with Babylonian practice.[99] The primary achievement of the geonim, then, is not liturgical innovation, but the institutionalization of strict guidelines for the enactment of already established customs or, conversely, asserting the right to excise particular customs from local worship.

Questions from outside of the Babylonian centers poured into the academies of the geonim, and their answers, in the form of responsa literature,

96. Reif, 136
97. Elbogen, 273.
98. Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 162.
99. Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 5.

determined proper behavior for the Jewish communities; subsequently, this literature has become the definitive source of information regarding the geonic era.[100] The geonic leadership, and the "authority of their written word", enjoyed a vast range of influence primarily because of advances in technology during this period.[101] The bound codex was a new advancement in reproducing literary texts, allowing the geonim to send their opinions to the far reaches of the Jewish world.[102] The advantage of the codex is that what had been the "exclusive terrain" for the scholarly expert, could now become familiar material for any literate Jew.[103] As a result, the entire agenda of the geonim became commonly known.

The primary objective for the geonim was to promote the Babylonian Talmud as the authoritative text of the Jewish community. The halakhic material transmitted through the talmud is considered the only valid expression of the Oral Torah.[104] Reif suggests that current scholarship

> is gradually indicating the major role played by the geonim in bringing all aspects of talmudic study, ideology, and practical guidance to the centre of religious activity. It was they who transmitted, expounded, and perfected the predominantly oral traditions and ultimately made it possible for actual copies of the texts to be circulated and for commnetaries to be composed.[105]

The pre-eminence of the Babylonian Talmud was not the only geonic value that spread throughout the known Jewish world. The geonim also conveyed in their

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100.Brody, 185.
101.Reif, 144.
102.Reif, 144.
103.Reif 148.
104.Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 162. See also Robert Brody, *The Geonim of Babylonia and the Shaping of Medieval Jewish Culture*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 161.
105.Reif, 146.

responsa an emphasis on synagogue worship and rabbinic authority, as well as issued responses to the alternative philosophical and religious systems of Christianity and Islam.[106]

Although the fundamental goals of the geonim remained the same over time, Hoffman posits three stages of geonic history, "each with its own tendencies, characteristic language, overall goals and motivating features": Period I spans from the time of Yehudai Gaon (757-761) until the time of Amram Gaon (842-871); period II is represented by Saadiah Gaon (928-942); and period III is marked by the novel approaches of the later geonim Sherira and Hai (936-1038)[107]. In establishing the hegemony of the geonim, the early geonic leadership, as described by Hoffman, "brooks no compromise, claims the absolute authority of Babylonian precedent, admits the academies and their titular heads, the geonim as the only post-talmudic guides."[108] The latter two periods allow for somewhat more flexibility and openness to differing practices, in part, because the communities in Babylonia became less politically and economically stable.[109]

E. The Responsa on the K'riat sh'ma al hamitah in their Historical Context:

The framework of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah as articulated in *Seder Rav Amram* well represents the first stage of geonic history. Despite his attempt to

106.Reif, 147.
107.Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 161.
108.Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 164.
109.Hoffman, *Canonization of the Synagogue Service*, 168.

standardize worship, there is no "pure" manuscript of the *Seder Rav Amram*; it is clear that copyists from different communities adjusted the text to reflect local customs.[110] Still, this is the "most important" prayerbook in Jewish history, and all subsequent literature regarding worship is based on the order of prayers as presented by Amram.[111] In the text regarding the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, Amram demonstrates prototypical characteristics of geonic literature: He relies almost solely on the Babylonian Talmud to support his authoritarian views. He does so by clearly defining the proper behavior during this ritual, and by setting forth the exact wording of the blessings. As part of the reliance on the Babylonian Talmud, he highlights talmud torah as the ideal mode of piety for the individual, and increases the verses of scripture included within the rubric, particularly by adding psalms that meet the definition of פסוקי דרחמי and שיא של פגעים.

The anonymous responsa is also an exemplary illustration of later geonic literature, although it is hard to determine its date. According to Brody, the anonymous nature of this text is typical of geonic responsa; over time scribes transformed the individual styles of the geonim to meet their particular needs.[112] Unlike *Seder Rav Amram* which states a preference for one interpretation of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah over another, the responsa gathers varying opinions into one strong argument for the Torah-based need to recite the sh'ma at night.

Neither of the the geonic texts question the dual recitation of the sh'ma at night. It might seem that the latter text identifies the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah as

110.Elbogen, 275. See also Brody, 192.
111.Elbogen, 275.
112.Brody, 190

the recitation which fulfills an individual's obligation to recite the sh'ma at night, "What is the reason a person is obligated to recite the sh'ma on his bed? In order to establish [the mitzvah of studying Torah] "when he lies down and when he rises up." However, Ta Sh'ma suggests that:

> The reason for the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is not for an essential law, or even to chase the demons, rather it is to study a chapter of Torah, even though a person has already recited it twice, in the morning and evening service...This is not the k'riat sh'ma that is the commonly obligated mitzvah, rather it is solely voluntary.[113]

By the end of the geonic era the primary goal of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is to take full advantage of the beneficial effects of immersing oneself in the study of Torah. By doing so, an individual can draw himself closer to God and protect himself in the vulnerable state of sleep. The source of the protection is clear—it is derived from the holiness of the divinely revealed Torah. This corresponds to the geonic need to assert the practices and values of the Babylonian scholarly elite, and only those values, onto the general Jewish population. The move from an emphasis on demons to an emphasis on Torah study also marks an intellectual shift for normative Judaism, that is, the move toward ratiocination that will find full expression in the works of Saadia and Maimonides.

Yet, the geonic texts reflect the highly developed belief in the world of demons and angels of medieval Jewry. According to Brody, "geonic circles, like their Rabbinite Jewish contemporaries were quite comfortable with this aspect of

113.Ta Sh'ma, 316

their heritage."[114] The fact that words of Torah shooed demons from the bed and kept evil spirits from harming individuals is a way to reiterate and strengthen the geonic agenda of talmud torah. In the passage from מדרש תנחומה even the demons recognize the power of the words of Torah. Indeed, even God becomes "enthroned" by the power of the word of the sh'ma. Thus, these texts suggest that the geonim embraced a concept of the spirit world similar to their Rabbinic forebears, but they refined the ways in which individuals deterred demons.

114. Brody, 142. See also Ruth Langer, *To Worship God Properly: Tensions between Liturgical Custom and Halakha in Judaism.* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1998), 23.

Chapter Five: The Origins of the K'riat Sh'ma Al Hamitah and the Phenomenon of Sleep

The conventional perception of sleep is captured by its dictionary definition, sleep is "a state of rest, characterized by relative physical and nervous inactivity."[115] In the common view, sleep is perceived as a state of complete immobility in which the mind and the body are utterly still. The truth is more complex than that: The body is as active during the state of sleep as it is during the state of wakefulness. Although we are not fully conscious of the activity, on some level our mind is aware of the actions of our body. Is there a connection, then, between the physiological process of sleep and the need for bedtime prayer? Moreover, does a reconsideration of the dynamics of sleep transform conventional ideas about the origins of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah?

A. The Conventional Interpretation of the K'riat sh'ma al hamitah: Connections Between Sleep and Death

According to traditional commentators, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah is a "spiritual insurance policy," protecting the individual from succumbing to "the sleep of death."[116] The connection between the bedtime prayer and death is well articulated by Neil Gillman. He believes that the rabbinic conceptualization of sleep incorporates an intricately formulated belief in resurrection. At the end of

115. *The American Heritage Dictionary,* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1982), 1150.
116. Abraham Millgram, *Jewish Worship.* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1971), 292.

time, God will raise righteous people from their graves, and reinspire their souls into their bodies.[117] The experience of sleep allowed the Rabbis to canonize this belief through liturgical innovation.

> It is noteworthy that the prayer to be recited before sleep and the one thanking God for having restored one's soul [elohai n'shema] recited upon awakening are immediately juxtaposed in their original source [B. Berakhot 60b]. They bracket the experience of sleep and convey the notion that sleep is like death...At the end of days, all dead bodies will come to life again, just as we awaken from sleep every morning and just as nature comes to life again each spring.[118]

The prayers express an underlying belief that the sleeping and waking cycle mimics the life and death cycle. Thus, at the heart of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, according to Gillman, is the issue of God's awesome power to draw life from death. Sleep is a foretaste of death; we utter praise to God before sleep as if we are entering into eternity.

Jakob Petuchowski believes this theory overstates the case that these prayers express a belief in resurrection. He asserts that they cannot be considered as "resurrection prayers" *per se*.[119] He notes that in the talmudic text they are included in a string of blessings to be said upon awakening in the morning. He concludes that the central theme of the morning prayer is the experience of *waking up*; and by extrapolation, the central theme of the nighttime custom is *going to sleep*. "God is praised here for the experience that one has just had, that of waking up in the morning. The doctrine of resurrection is not the first thing that

117.Neil Gillman, *The Death of Death*. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Press, 1997), 134.
118.Gillman, 136.
119.Jakob Petuchowksi,"Modern Misunderstandings of an Ancient Benediction." *Studies in Modern Theology and Prayer*. (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), 186.

enters one's mind. The fact of waking up is."[120] He acknowledges that the prayers suggest a belief in life after death, but their express purpose is to highlight the "daily miracle" of rising safely from sleep.

Both thinkers neglect the meaning the Rabbis themselves ascribe to the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, that is, the need to shoo demons from the area in which a person sleeps. This is not surprising; it is difficult for modern scholars to take seriously a belief in demons and angels. However, the amoraim and geonim eagerly accepted a belief in a spiritual world beyond the world of sensory perception. The sleep experience itself may have led the way to this belief, because it offers human beings an alternative reality within their everyday lives. The Rabbis intuitively recognized that sleep is not a period when the individual is "at rest." Rather, as modern researchers have learned, the time of sleep is a period of active engagement in a realm of our lives that we cannot comprehend through conscious thought alone.

B. The Physiology of Sleep:

In part, the conventional idea that sleep is a state of peaceful rest emerges from the physical results of a sound sleep. The sleep process allows the body to be restored to homeostasis; without sleep, the various bodily systems are severely compromised.[121] During sleep, blood circulates throughout the body, bringing vital nutrients and oxygen to the cells. Meanwhile, cells expel toxins, which are

120. Petuchowski, *Studies in Modern Theology and Prayer*, 187.
121. Valerie Free, "The Science of Sound Sleep," *Complementary Healing*. (Riverside, CT: Complementary Healing Press, 1998), 5.

carried away with other waste products by the lymphatic system. Researchers have discovered that cells, organs, and the hormonal and immune systems all seem to have "molecular clocks" that drive the daily sleep and wake cycles.[122] Without sleep, we would die; in fact, sleep deprivation is "100% lethal" in rats because the lack of sleep destroyed their immune systems.[123]

During sleep there are a number of changes that affect the body; for example, muscles tense and relax, and there are fluctuations in pulse, temperature, and blood pressure.[124] The organ which experiences the most activity and is most affected by the sleep process is the brain. In 1935 the first sleep experiments charted the bodily changes that accompany the experience of sleep. Using an electroencephalograph, scientists were able to measure brain waves of both sleeping and wakeful subjects, and discovered that a dynamic array of electrical impulses were emitted during sleep.[125] Building on that research, sleep specialists have located groups of neurons in the brain that are at rest when human beings are awake, and active during sleep. Thus, there is no moment when the brain is simply "at rest."

The best known aspect of brain activity during sleep is the phase of sleep known for its rapid eye movement, that is, REM sleep. During this phase, which occurs three to four times a night, there is a spiking of activity in cells in the brain stem, alerting the cortex to send messages to inhibit movement in all muscles that are not essential to metabolism. All neurological commands for voluntary

122.Free, 6.
123.Free, 7
124.Free, 6.
125.Free, 6.

movement are thereby blocked from reaching the muscles and spinal cord.[126] The only group of muscles that are not affected by this temporary paralysis are the muscles in the eye, which are marked by brisk, erratic movements. Other characteristics of REM sleep include irregular breathing, variable heart rate, and increased sexual excitement. [127]

The most intriguing and significant characteristic of REM sleep is increased dream activity in the individual. Dreams are highly unstable, hallucinatory experiences that occur only when we sleep. They provide images in which "our sensory impressions are not anchored by input by the physical sense organs."[128] There is a spectrum of opinion about the purposes of dreams. On one end of the spectrum, there are theorists, like Sigmund Freud, who believe that dreams are a product of our psyches, providing access to our unconscious desires. For Freud, these desires are almost always connected to subconscious libidinal desires. In this view, our dreams are puzzles that can be solved; by interpreting dreams correctly, we gain better insight into our "true" selves.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are theorists, like Allan Hobson and Robert McCarley, who believe that dreams are a product of the evolutionary development of mammals.[129] In their view, the "activation-synthesis" theory of dreams, the content of dreams are "no more meaningful than an inkblot."[130] Hobson and McCarley recognize that because all mammals experience REM

126. Robert Ornstein, *The Evolution of Consciousness*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 194.
127. Ornstein, 194.
128. Ornstein, 195.
129. Ornstein, 196.
130. Ornstein, 196

sleep, dreams cannot be a product of the human subconscious mind only. Rather, REM sleep stimulates the nervous system and prepares the individual for the fundamental aspects of survival, that is, searching for food, fighting adversaries, fleeing from danger, and engaging in sexual activity. This is why, Hobson and McCarley suggest, the sexual drive is increased during sleep. In addition, REM sleep assists in the adaptation to new environments; for example, people learning new and difficult tasks during the day tend to experience more REM sleep during the night[131]. For these scientists dreams are simply a by-product of the REM process, cells in the brain stem that happen to be activated and transformed into images.

Robert Ornstein, a researcher on the human brain, believes the truth about dreams lies somewhere between the two extremes. He agrees that the ability to dream is a result of the evolutionary process, but he also recognizes that the content of dreams can be meaningful to the dreamer. He maintains that:

> The best answer to why we dream is because we have brains. Because it is essential to survival for us to have a map of the world "ready at mind," our brains model worlds whether they are based on current information from our senses or on internally generated activation of collected experiences and current concerns. In both cases the world we inhabit is assembled from pieces of experience produced by the modules of the mind. It is not easy to tell a dream from waking, which should alert us to how distant we are from direct knowledge of the world around us.[132]

Our minds, then, need to perceive the world both through external, sensory stimuli during our waking hours, and through the internal, random images of our

131.Ornstein, 197
132. Ornstein, 196

sleeping hours. More importantly, our dreams are *real* experiences and central to human consciousness.

Our ability to remember dreams, Ornstein suggests, made the origins of dreams one of the "great mysteries" of life.[133] "It is not surprising," he writes, "that many prescientific societies believe dreams are the true experiences of the spirit wandering in other worlds as real as this. In some cultures the dream world is thought of as a meeting place where man can communicate with spiritual beings or powers."[134]. Some theorists even suggest that the appearance of the dead in dreams may be the origin of a belief in life after death.[135] Thus, REM sleep is essential to life, essential to helping us find our way in the world. The need to sleep and dream is inextricably linked to the very essence of what it means to be a human being, and raises larger questions of life and death.

C. The Phenomenon of Sleep and the K'riat sh'ma al hamitah:

The rabbinic conceptualization of the spiritual world is a prescientific acknowledgement that our conscious minds are limited in their perception of the world "out there." Jacob Neusner believes there are four themes that are explored in rabbinic prayer, they are: the temple and its cult; Israel's sacred history; the wrath of God; and the humility and helplessness of man.[136] The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah falls under the final category of prayer, expressing the absolute

133.Ornstein, 198
134.Ornstein, 196
135.Ornstein, 198
136.Jacob Neusner,*Invitation to the Talmud* (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1984), 12.

dependency that human beings have upon God. This prayer acknowledges that human beings cannot be defined by their conscious, waking hours alone; there is a whole other level of consciousness that contributes to the totality of the human experience Although proper control over our thoughts and actions is socially preferable, by saying a prayer during the final moments before sleep—and particularly the words of the sh'ma and birkhat mapil—there is a ritualized acknowledgement that no one can escape the pull of our unconscious selves. The tug of sleep brings this fact to our attention; prayer helps us to place it into a conceptual framework. Victor Turner suggests that this is the role of ritual. As Rachel Adler explains:

> Turner locates the meanings expressed in ritual not above or transcendent to but underneath ordinary reality on a metamorphic core of meanings ["the antistructure"] over which social structures are built...Rather than being one-dimensional or static, these elements of the antistructure are multivocal and liquid, filled with possibilities for transformation. Opportunities for renewal and transformation occur in special events, such as liturgical rituals, which open access to the antistructure. These events are characterized by *liminality*; that is, they happen away from or on the edges of the usual order of the social structure.[137]

Those moments before sleep, when the isolated self lies face to face with the darkness is a liminal experience *par excellence*. The hope on the part of the worshipper is that life itself will be renewed in the morning.

The Rabbis recognized that the move from a wakeful conscious state to a sleeping unconscious state entails a transitional process. These existential states

137. Rachel Adler, *Engendering Judaism: An Inclusive Theology and Ethic*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), 83-84.

are, in the words of Robert Ornstein, "equally real", in that they both entail a journey "in a world made for us by our brain functions."[138] The use of prayer to help the individual move through this liminal moment was the natural choice for the Rabbis. In their view, the intentionality of prayer allowed the individual to embrace both intellectual cognition and intuitive perception. "The prescriptive rabbinic rules for the actions of prayer ritual," writes Tzvee Zahavy, "require that one maintain some contact with the logical structures of ordinary reality. The ritual takes place in a heightened state of intuitive awareness linked to a controlled engagement with ordinary consciousness."[139] As the individual prepares to enter into a different state of consciousness, the use of prayer, the refocusing of one's awareness, aids in the change process. Prayer demarcates the boundary line between the two "equally real" experiences, thereby placing the uncontrollable urge to sleep into a coherent framework of daily activities.

Another interesting correlation between the physiology of sleep and the Jewish bedtime custom is the centrality of optical activity. The optical imagery of the birkhat mapil takes on greater significance in view of the modern discovery of the significance of REM sleep. The Rabbis recognized that although darkness envelopes a sleeping person, his or her eyes continue to move and "see" a variety of dream images. These images, the Rabbis believed, were as real as the images of their waking lives. Within the framework of the birkhat mapil, visual awareness is the sign of life. The Rabbis were grateful to safely pass through their

138.Ornstein, 196.

139.Tzvee Zahavy, *Studies in Jewish Prayer.* ((Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1990), 116.

dreams and return to the reality of daily life, expressing a sense of awe by the ability to open their eyes to a new morning.

For the Rabbis, the inclusion of the recitation of the sh'ma was particularly useful in a ritual that linked two states of consciousness. The sh'ma offered a complex of images upon which the worshiper could concentrate. By meditating on the sh'ma, the worshipper immediately has access to the "major components of the symbolic system of rabbinic Judaism, and its images, and its myths with key words."[140] The sh'ma offers a "short-cut", an immediate map of the universe in which worshipers can locate themselves. Although they may be entering the confusing state of sleep, the sh'ma reassures the worshipers that the universe is an ordered creation, emerging out of Divine love and omnipotence.

Michael Fishbane posits a deeper level of meaning in any recitation of the sh'ma, one that supports the traditional connection between the bedtime prayer and death. When worshipers recite the sh'ma, he suggests, they reenact Rabbi Akiva's martyred death as it is reported in B.Berakhot 61b. As he died, Rabbi Akiva recited the sh'ma as a testimony to his devotion to God.[141] He declared, "My whole life I have been troubled by this verse "with all your soul" which means: even if He takes your soul. I wondered if I should have the opportunity to fulfill it; and now that I do, shall I not fulfill it?" He died as he uttered the final word of the sh'ma, "one."

Fishbane tracks this stylized image of the martyr's death throughout

140.Zahavy, *Studies in Jewish Prayer*, 115.

141.Michael Fishbane *The Kiss of God: Spiritual and Mystical Death in Judaism.* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994), 67.

Jewish history. He concludes that the re-enactment (pre-enactment?) of death is as important as the proclamation of loyalty to God in the recitation of the sh'ma:

> Here we have the ritualization of death: a performance of the sh'ma in wholehearted devotion and the intent to offer one's soul to God if required. Such a person practices the ultimate passion daily—during recitation of the credo—and thereby at that time is forgiven all his sins, even the most severe. By such acts a person is "as if" dead, so wholly has he devoted his soul to God's keeping; and he can therefore be shriven of sins requiring death itself for atonement. Ritual dying is thus a mode of purification and self-transformation. Through the model of the martyrs, liturgy imitates life.[142]

Therefore, the sh'ma aids the transformation from wakefulness to sleep because it is also associated with the transformation from life to death. In each experience, the individual moves to a new existential state, one enshrouded in mystery. Thus, there is merit to the conventional interpretation that the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah allows the worshipper to "rehearse" the experience of death and resurrection. The only intimation that human beings have to a state of non-existence is the unconsciousness that sleep provides. We are not aware of a "self" when we are in a dream-state, and yet we are aware of images and experiences.

The openness and liminality of the experience of sleep, however, refers to the mystery of death and also *beyond* it. For the Rabbis, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah refers to the mystery of cosmos, the many levels of reality that emerge out of the creative will of God. The Rabbis recognized that sleep offers us a pathway into that different, "fuller" reality beyond the one of our waking lives. They articulated this idea through their belief in the metaphysical world of angels

142. Fishbane, 82.

and demons. In this way, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah no longer serves only to protect the individual; it also becomes a password into another realm of existence.

Within the context of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, sleep is an opportunity to connect to the source of our very existence, a way of uniting with God. It is a risky venture, requiring a Divine-human relationship built on a foundation of trust. The שיר של פגעים, psalms 3 and 91, and the פסוקי דרחמי, identified by the verse "Into Your hand, I entrust my spirit, Adonai, God of truth." (Psalm 31:6), attempt to articulate this stance of faithfulness. The architects of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah use these scriptural passages to call on God's capacity for mercy and compassion. They articulate a belief that God alone is the refuge from all danger.

During that liminal moment before we descend into the alternative world of dreams, the bedtime prayer acknowledges a sense of awe that surrounds all aspects of our lives. It reinforces the idea that the light of day does not necessarily give way to unending darkness. We can fall safely into the shadowy world of dreams, secure in the knowledge that the darkness of sleep, or for that matter of death, is no darkness at all. The ultimate message of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, then, is articulated in the chatima of the birkhat mapil: the entire universe—all realms of reality—are illuminated by the loving presence of God.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

When so many traditional Jewish ritual moments are communally oriented, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah stands out: It highlights a radically individualized period of time. What could be more private than those moments in the dark, when the urge to sleep creeps in? In many ways, those are the most precarious moments in an individual's daily routine—even if that individual happens to live in material comfort, in the early 21st century. Of all the ritualized moments in the traditional daily liturgy, the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah may be the most accessible to contemporary Jews, precisely because of its emphasis on the individual.

In the course of this thesis, I have traced the early development of the bedtime recitation of the sh'ma—from the earliest conflict about bedtime prayer between the schools of Hillel and Shammai; through the differentiation between the bedtime custom and the evening service; through the codification of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah. This development took place within a Jewish sociological context that emphasized communal relationships over personal identity. On the other hand, we live in an age when a sense of spiritual wholeness, of identity in general, emerges from the personal outward.

Some researchers suggest that sleep patterns reflect sociological patterns. In the United States, the number of people with sleep disorders is on the rise, in

part, because of the sense of isolation inherent in contemporary American culture.[143] For some people, sleep is not a fearful prospect; they are ready to delve into the unconsciousness at the end of another harried and over-scheduled day. For others, sleep comes less readily, and they hold it at bay with late-night television, surfing the Internet, or a myriad of other strategies of avoidance. In either case, taking a few moments to orient our thoughts toward the larger universe may help place the activities of the day into a meaningful context. As Tikvah Frymer Kensky has written:

> Weekend doses of spirituality and religion from the sacred religions to which we belong are often not enough to bring holiness and a sense of integration to daily activities...When we (Jews and non-Jews) realize that something is lacking we may actively engage in a search for ultimate meaning in life and spiritual values. We use daily spiritual practices to tune our consciousness to the Divine—but we cannot spend the entire day praying and meditating.[144]

For contemporary people seeking a Jewish spiritual path, some variation of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah might be a first step. In a culture where social and professional competition and individual bravado are valued, this prayer allows for a moment in the day when fear and vulnerability are acceptable emotions. Our culture also stresses the desire to remain "forever young," denying the reality of the aging process and of our mortality. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah provides a counter-cultural message, one that emphasizes the value of each day, and the reality of our transient lives.

There have been several attempts to turn those moments of the night prior

143.Free, 5.
144.Tikvah Frymer Kensky, "Toward a Liberal Theory of Halakha," *Tikkun* (Vol. 10, No. 4), 45.

to sleep into a meditative experience. The Union of American Hebrew Congregations recognizes that bedtime is a powerful moment during which parents can establish family traditions and create lasting Jewish memories for their children. The Department of Family Education has created a pamphlet with an abbreviated version of the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah, stressing the importance of Jewish ritual: "The purpose of Jewish ritual is to provide us with a sense of connection with the Jewish people and to infuse into our daily lives a feeling of familiarity and belonging."[145] CLAL, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, recognizes that adults experience the same need for belonging. The "Kavannah for Living" program has created a sleep ritual based on the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah that faces the "new set of challenges at bedtime—dealing with the anxiety that stems from living in a culture that loads our minds with information and moves at lightning speeds. A spiritual approach to sleep aims to counter our anxieties with a dose of self-transformation."[146] All of the major movements of liberal Judaism have created a prayer ritual based on the k'riat sh'ma al hamitah.[147]

A bedtime ritual alone cannot bridge the gap between an individual's search for meaning and his or her sense of connection to Judaism. Accepting Judaism as a spiritual path entails participation in Jewish communal rituals.

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145. Copyright Department of Jewish Education, Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1999.

146. Copyright CLAL-The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership, www.clalrabbis.net, 1999-2001.

147. See *On the Doorposts of Your House and Siddur Lev Hadash* for Reform versions; *Siddur Sim Shalom* for a Conservative version; and *Kol Haneshema: Hol*, for a Reconstructionist version.

However, for many contemporary Jews this experience is a difficult one, fraught with feelings of insecurity and inauthenticity. The privacy of a bedtime ritual can provide the safety net needed to begin to live a Jewish life, both for individuals and for families. This, in turn, can lead to a desire to increase our participation in the Jewish community, deepening our sense of rootedness in the world, and strengthening our relationship with one another and the Divine. In addition, the theology of the bedtime sh'ma posits a loving and comforting God, one to whom we can turn at times of vulnerability and uncertainty. The k'riat sh'ma al hamitah opens the way, as it did for our ancestors, for each of us to say upon entering into the mysterious world of our dreams, Psalm 31:6: "Into Your hands, I entrust my spirit, Adonai, when I sleep and when I wake."

כן יהי רצון.

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