

Rabbi Shelley Goldman * Rosh HaShannah Day II 5779 * Sept. 11, 2018

"Imagine a Brighter Future: The Shema"

The Shema is a prayer we recite from childhood by rote. What are these words that we often describe as our people's statement of faith? They are to be on our lips when we wake up in the morning and when we go to sleep at night. We say them at the beginning of each Torah service with the holy scroll held in reverence in front of the congregation and we will end the High Holy Day cycle by proclaiming them at the conclusion of *Ne'ilah*, the final service of Yom Kippur. *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad. Hear, O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.*

The traditional Jewish prayer formula almost always begins with the words *Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheynu Melech HaOlam*, Blessed are You Adonai our God, Sovereign of the Universe, but The Shema, our most central declaration, does not begin that way. Why did these few words come to such a hallowed place in our tradition? How did they become our Statement of Faith? What do these words mean?

I often puzzle over each of these words and would like to suggest some alternate ways of understanding them. Let's go word by word.

Shema means to hear or to listen. A contemporary translation might render it as "Listen Up!" or "pay attention." In the Biblical book of Deuteronomy, "hearing" or "listening" is considered the central way of knowing something. By contrast, the book of Exodus often references "seeing" as the way one gains knowledge. I find it fascinating that within different books of Torah we find statements disagreeing on "the best way to learn." These are ideas that we are still debating today, though we now

understand that all ways of learning and knowing are valid, and different forms work for different people. Shema – means listen. Understand.

The next term is *Yisrael*. At first glance, this word seems simple. It is the name of our people Israel, in its Hebrew pronunciation. Early one momentous dawn, Jacob was renamed Israel and we have been known as *B'nai Yisrael*, the children of Israel, the descendants of Jacob, ever since.

Names are important and often contain deeper meanings. Jacob was renamed *Yisrael* after he had wrestled with an angel all night long. The angel was an emissary of God, or perhaps God's Self had come to engage our patriarch. Thus, the name *Yisrael* means one who wrestles with God. "Yisra" to struggle and "El" God, the short form of the more familiar Hebrew word *Elohim*.

Just as our ancestor Jacob, struggled with God, so do we all ask questions and push back, each in our own way. We wonder about the existence of evil in the world. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent, if God is all knowing, all powerful, and everywhere all at the same time, why then is there so much suffering in the world? As Jews we value asking questions. So revered is the asking of the question that we are encouraged to question even The Creator of All! *Yisrael* – we are the people who struggle with and for God.

Adonai is the personal name of God. The ineffable, the name so sacred that we do not say it out loud. It is made up of the letters *Yod-Hey-Vav-Hey* which, were we to try to pronounce them, would actually come out as all breath.

It is not an accident that God's most special name is all breath, for God is the reality that implants within us the breath of life. Other names for God that we have in our tradition are *Hey HaOlamim* or *Ruach HaOlam*, translated as Life Force of All the Worlds, the wind of the world, or the soul of the world. The Hebrew language is rich in tone and expresses the interconnections between our breath, our soul, our life itself, and the great Mystery which has led to our creation and existence on this earth at this time and in this place.

Eloheynu is perhaps the most recognizable word. It means Our God. It is made up of the word *Eloha*, meaning God, and the possessive plural ending, *eynu*. If *Eloheynu* is too hierarchical or patriarchal for your sensibilities, there are other words in Jewish tradition that can be substituted in, including *Eyn HaHayim*, Source of Life or *Shechinah*, the mystical name for the feminine aspect of God. The *Shechinah* is, in Kabbalah, one of ten aspects of the Divine and she resides closest to the earth. *Shechinah* is the aspect of God that is most accessible to human beings.

The final word is *Echad*, One. This simple sixth word of the Shema is deep in meaning. It affirms the oneness of God, the oneness of the universe, and can also be translated as "unique." God is Other, so different from any other reality that we know of, so Other that we have trouble even understanding the nature of God, let alone putting that understanding into words.

With all of these meanings in mind, I offer this translation of *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheynu Adonai Echad*: "Listen Up! God-Wrestlers! Adonai is our God, Adonai is Unique."

When I taught this lesson recently, one of our congregants reflected that she had never considered that the word *Echad* could mean one, not as a mathematical statement, but as in “One of a Kind” or Unique, the unity that transcends us, the oneness that unites us.

Why are these six words and the short paragraph that follows, what we know as The V’ahavta, our central prayer? The short answer is that they are Biblical in origin and The Rabbis of Old, always looking to previous precedent, instituted these words as our first standard prayer, our oldest bit of liturgy. In ancient times the prayer service consisted of The Shema and The Amidah and that’s it! Everything else that we say and sing in a Friday night service, on Saturday mornings, or even during the High Holy Days developed later. Sigh. Oh for simpler times!

Why did the Rabbis find these verses from Deuteronomy so compelling? Our Shabbat Torah Commentary suggests, “Perhaps it is because they contain in just a few lines the basic theological commitments of Judaism: There is a God, there is only one God and God is not only singular but also unique. No other being is like God; the Children of Israel seek an intimate relationship with God and we are enjoined to love God wholeheartedly, to study God’s words, and to teach God’s words to our children.¹”

In other words, the Shema and V’ahavta are saying: There is a higher reality or a life-force greater than ourselves. We who are but flesh and blood are attuned to this reality, there is order to the Universe and a power that transcends our own will, and helps to shape our individual human desires and purpose.

¹ [Etz Hayim Torah Commentary](#) page 1024.

Emmanuel Levinas, one of the most important Jewish and secular thinkers of the 20th Century, spoke of philosophy not as the “love of wisdom” but as the “wisdom of love.” Levinas was not a free-love hippy of the 1960s in the United States but, rather, a Lithuanian-born French Jew who survived World War II as a French prisoner of war. His wife and child also survived, being hidden in a monastery, but Levinas lost the rest of his family.

Levinas came to the “wisdom of love” through the crucible of fire. In keeping with the traditional view of the V’ahavta, he believed that the job of the Jew is to serve The Divine “with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might.” He asked: How can we possibly serve God in every moment?! He proposed that we serve God, the great “O” Other by serving the little “o” other who is right before us. For the trace of God is found on the face of the other. Had all humanity remembered this and known the “wisdom of love,” as opposed to striving for the “love of wisdom,” then things might have turned out differently for Levinas and his family.

The Talmud similarly taught: “A human king strikes coins in his image, and every one of them is identical. God creates every person in the divine image, yet each one is different from the other. Each one is a unique representation of the divine image which is in each person.”

In this New Year 5779 how might we better enact the “wisdom of love?” How might we imagine a better future for ourselves and our children in the weeks, months, and years to come? How might we honor the teachings of our tradition that proclaim

that “every human being has irreducible worth and dignity because every human is fashioned in the image of God?²”

The Shema and V’Ahavta are meaningfully related to two verses from Leviticus Chapter 19, which we will read on Yom Kippur afternoon. “Love your fellow human being as yourself,³” and, “The immigrant who resides with you shall be to you as one of your citizens; you shall love the stranger as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I, Adonai, am your God.⁴” The commandment to love our neighbor is found in Leviticus chapter 19, verse 18. The commandment to love the stranger is found in Leviticus chapter 19, verse 34. The commandment to love God comes later, in Deuteronomy. We learn to love God by loving God’s creatures, our fellow human beings⁵, neighbors and strangers alike.

In a poem entitled “V’ahavta,” Aurora Levins Morales writes, “Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up, when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts, embroider them upon your garments, teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies, recite them in your sleep: Another world is possible... Don’t let despair sink in. Escalate your dreams. Hold hands. Keep imagining.”

In the New Year, let us dream, imagining new possibilities. And, holding hands, let us bring them into being.

² [Etz Hayim Torah Commentary](#) page 10.

³ Leviticus 19:18

⁴ Leviticus 19:34

⁵ [Etz Hayim Torah Commentary](#) page 1025.