

The Shema and the Art of Listening

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On some level part of what makes the High Holidays so powerful is that it offers us the opportunity to connect to congregants we have not seen, to our tradition, to our liturgy, and to our family. While this is what pulls us here, the truth is that none of these things are easy.

Ironically, sometimes it may even be easier to be close to loved ones from a distance. Beth Brown lights shabbat candles every Friday night with her mother, even though she lives in Dallas and her mother is in New York. Through the virtual reality program known as Second Life they are brought together on the internet. The site which has almost 4 million users is a three-dimensional online game in which the avatars of participants interact in a virtual world, buying and selling land and products. It even has a synagogue, Temple Beit Israel, which has several hundred members. I will believe it is realistic when the avatars can nap during the rabbi's sermons and a breakaway shul is formed.

The 33 year old Orthodox Brown relayed to a reporter how emotional it has been for her to be a part of this community. "Once people started coming, I felt deep down inside that this was an obligation to the Jewish people around the world." She feels a sense of obligation and loyalty to her people, factors which also attract us to each other and to the synagogue.

Some may have issues or difficulties with the tradition, with their family, or with the prayers and the theology they express. Yet despite whatever problems we have, we seek each other out and come together this time of year. We come because it is a tradition to do so and we recognize value in being part of a continuum that is greater than any one of us. We come out of a sense of loyalty to our people, to our heritage and to our ancestors. We come to be inspired, to learn something and to find meaning and purpose in our lives.

By coming to shul, we become part of a praying community.

For many of us, prayer may present its own unique set of challenges. We may wonder what impact is there in reciting a set of words crafted by others long ago. We may ask how is this intended to move us, and who is listening to us anyway? Are the prayers directed towards God, or are they for our ears?

Of all the thousands of words recited on the High holy days each of us surely has our personal favorite. It could be the haunting Aveenu Malkenu, or the Unateneh Tokef, which forces us to think about our fate and mortality by asking "who shall live and who shall die". Or it could be one of the standard prayers of our daily or Shabbat liturgy that moves you. Or your favorite part of the service might be when the rabbi says, "We now rise for the closing prayer."

Pity the poor individual who came to shul once a year, on Yom Kippur afternoon. He actually had the chutzpah to complain to his rabbi about the repetitiveness of the service and said, "Rabbi, you know I consider myself a deeply spiritual person. I come here once a year, but every time I come you are reading the exact same story about Jonah and the whale!"

Tonight I would like to analyze the six words which you probably hear every time you come here or to any synagogue, whether it is once a year, or more often, whether it is on Shabbat or a weekday, whether you get here early or come late. It is the most well known of all Jewish prayers, and is said several times at every service. The first prayer we learn as children, it actually is not really a prayer, but rather a statement, a statement of belief that begins with the injunction to Hear: *Shema*.

The six words that comprise the shema have power and meaning that transcend beyond the mere words themselves. The shema comes from Deuteronomy, the last of the Five Books of Moses. Rabbi Norman Lamm in his book about the Shema says it is "the symbol of Jewish courage, hope and commitment." Traditionally, it is what a Jew says as his last words, before he dies.

Throughout the ages, its recital has been associated with proud defiant heroism. It has been a rallying cry, a pronouncement of belief in a Supreme Being who is above all and who cares about the world He has created. The stirring story of Rabbi Akiba, recalled and retold each Yom Kippur tells how he was tortured and executed by the Romans in the second century. As a means of showing that he retained his belief in God, in decency and humanity and that he did not succumb to those who sought to repress his spirit and faith, with his last breath, he uttered the shema. His saga is recorded in the Talmud, and is retold each Yom Kippur, as we will recall it again tomorrow morning. All his life he wondered if he would be able to declare his love for God with all his heart and all his soul. He felt content to know that he had fulfilled this supreme act of love.

The phrase was uttered throughout the period of the Crusades and the Middle Ages by Jews who were tortured and persecuted for their beliefs.

With Akiba as their example, centuries later during the Holocaust, many of our fellow Jews who were martyred and murdered defied their persecutors by clinging to their belief in God. They showed their strength and resistance in the face of inconceivable hatred by proclaiming the shema in the gas chambers, even as they knew with certainty the terminal nature of their fate. "*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Elohenu, Adonai Echad!*" they shouted.

The shema is a symbol and proud statement, a rejection of the persecutors who sought to impose their barbaric ways on a people who walk with God and whose mission and purpose is to make the world a better place. While the tormentors committed their inhuman acts, the victims responded with this simple affirmation of belief in a moral God. By defying and resisting the power that sought to suppress them they both overcame the indignity they suffered and attempts at humiliation and showed that belief

in the goodness of man and God is stronger and more powerful than the depravity that is its antithesis.

The Shema is also a statement of courage.

Last summer Major Roi Klein the deputy commander of the Golani 51st brigade and father of two small children aged one and three served in Lebanon. Known among his family and friends for his exceptional spiritual and moral attributes, he was an accomplished saxophone player with an infectious laugh. Considered by all who knew him as a sensitive, calm, spiritual person, he was described in the words of one friend as “a modest, humble, honest person, an idealist who constantly demanded more of himself and as one who didn't seem like a fighter.”

But when the fate of Israel hung in the balance last year, he knew what he had to do. He returned to Lebanon, where he had survived an intense battle just a few years earlier. Only this time he was not so lucky. During fierce clashes with Hezbollah forces in Lebanon, he noticed a grenade was thrown towards a battalion of his men. Realizing it was too late to protect or warn them, Roi selflessly threw his body over the grenade and absorbed the impact of the blast, saving the lives of his soldiers.

Just before he gasped his last breath, like the martyrs of previous generations, the men whose lives he had just saved heard him muster the strength to proclaim as his last words, "Shema Yisrael." A few days later, on his 31st birthday he was buried.

“By saying the most central declaration of faith in Jewish liturgy,” one article wrote, “Klein transformed the meaning of the Shema, which in the Jewish exile was associated with martyrdom in the face of anti-Semitic persecution, into a religious battle cry.”

What is it about this prayer that makes it so powerful and compelling throughout the ages?

A Hasidic master claims that we elevate ourselves and along with us, all of creation when we say it because we are reaching out to the holy and pure. A midrash from Deuteronomy Rabbah uses a comment on the verse in Ecclesiastes, “For there is not a just man on earth that does good and sins not” to associate listening and doing. Rabbi Norman Lamm explains that we often fall short in our actions and that imperfection is the inescapable lot of humanity. Although we often do good, we can never consistently and thoroughly avoid evil. Reciting the shema compensates for our shortcomings by reminding us of the ideal we should strive to reach. In other words, even if we cannot achieve perfection, the shema reminds us of one of the overriding messages of Yom Kippur, of the grand and noble capacity of human potential in partnership with God.

The shema explicitly contends that there are no gods other than Adonai, the God of the universe, the same God who has a unique covenantal relationship with the people Israel. The saying from the Hebrew Scriptures affirms the oneness of God and firmly denies the

concept of duality and polytheism. But it is much more than merely a mathematical reduction of the many to one.

A number of the classic medieval commentaries point out that the word echad means more than just one. It means unique. Consequently the phrase is an expression of the uniqueness of Adonai, of our God. The Holy One is unlike any other living being. One of those unique aspects is the inability to know or fully comprehend the Divine Entity known as Adonai.

Finally, the word echad can be related to a concept of the unity to be found in the universe, an idea poignantly explored by the great thinker Albert Einstein. The Ziditchover Rebbe says that when we recite the shema we acknowledge that our lives which are normally so fragmented, disconnected and chaotic can become integrated and at one with the rest of the world through the sense of unity with the Creator.

We may each have different interpretations of the subject or object of the sentence, and we may even debate the meaning of the predicate. As Leonard Fein, once put it, Jews may not be able to agree about anything, including, and especially when it comes to our belief in God. But the one aspect of theology upon which all Jews do agree, is that God, whether we believe in Him or not, is one.

A story about an assimilated secular Jewish family captures this sentiment. They moved away from the city to a small town and enrolled their child in the best school in the area, a Catholic parochial school. To their dismay their child came home after the first day and said, "Daddy, you'll never guess what I learned today. Did you know that God is really three, that there is a Father, a son and a Holy Ghost, and that his son died for our sins?" The distraught father was concerned about what his son was learning. To set the record straight he sat down and firmly told his child not to believe everything they told him in school. To be sure the child understood he looked him in the eyes and said, "Let me make it clear, son. There is no such thing as a trinity. There is only one God, and we don't believe in Him."

Rabbi Zadok HaKohen describes the experience of saying the shema with full kavanah, with total feeling and being absorbed in the words, as the means of affirming our autonomous selfhood as creatures worthy of standing before the Almighty One.

Although I am focusing my comments on the one line, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One", the shema also refers to the paragraphs which follow it, such as the v'ahavta where each Jew is commanded to love God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might. The blessings that precede and follow the shema are an integral part of the whole package, for they express acceptance of the yoke of the commandments and recognition of God as Creator.

Even if you do not currently subscribe to the philosophical or theological implication of accepting the yoke of the commandments, I would nevertheless suggest on this Yom

Kippur if you do not currently say the shema as part of your regimen before going to bed at night, begin to do so.

A statement of faith, a triumphant rejection of the persecutors and their ideology, a battle cry, it also holds sway over us as a symbol of Jewish continuity, perseverance and survival as evidenced by the following story, of which there are numerous accounts.

I have read several poignant true tales told about Jewish children orphaned from their parents by the Nazis. In one rendering, it takes place at the Warsaw Children's Hospital immediately after the Second World War. In another, it occurs in a convent where Jewish children were entrusted to nuns by Jewish parents who wanted to hide and save their children's lives, as the parents knew the fate that awaited them in concentration and extermination camps.

In each version a rabbi who came to rescue Jewish children was told that there were no Jewish children among the orphans. The skeptical rabbi asked to say just a few words to the children before they went to sleep. Slowly he recited the words Shema yisrael, and as he did, suddenly he heard voices join in with him. The children remembered what their parents had taught them and used to say to them at bedtime. With this simple prayer they ran, embraced the rabbi, and were thus reunited with their people.

I want you to ask yourselves tonight, would your children know this prayer? And if they do know it, would they know it because they learned it from you, or because they learned it in religious school?

I urge you, on this Yom Kippur, say it. Say it with your children and say it yourself as well before you go to bed every night.

There is one other aspect of the shema I would like to raise which has nothing to do with the deep theological concepts of this prayer, but everything to do with its meaning. I would suggest that beyond the important truths contained within the shema, and the statement of faith it expresses, there is another element which makes it so significant and which is deserving of our consideration this evening.

Part of its power is the simplicity of the opening word: Shema: Hear, or listen.

It calls out to us to listen to the sounds of the world as well as of those around us.

It may also entail being able to hear and appreciate silence as well. A story is told of a visitor to a small town who joined the locals on the porch of where he was staying. No one said a word, and after awhile he asked if there was a law against talking in the town. One of the men replied, "No, there's no law here against talking, but we have an understanding that no one is to speak unless he can improve on the silence."

One of the problems with our society is that we do not listen. The prolific author Taylor Caldwell once wrote, "One of the most terrible aspects of the world today is this:

Nobody listens to anyone. If you are bewildered or frightened or lost or bereaved or alone, nobody really listens. Nobody has time to listen to anyone. Even those who love you the most – your parents, your children have no time.”

Not even people who are paid to listen actually listen. There is a joke about a psychiatrist who was talking with a friend. The friend said, “Mel, I don’t know how you do it. How can you bear to listen hour after hour, day in day out, to people pouring out their hearts about their problems to you?” To which the psychiatrist replied, “Sol, who listens?!”

High school and colleges have classes in public speaking, but perhaps what we need are classes to develop our listening skills. There is such a proliferation of talk shows, but maybe what we would be better off if instead there were more “listening” shows.

The art of listening is crucial to relationships because it means to actually be attentive to the other, to be present to the needs of another person. It means to be tuned into the other, to be sensitive to the predicament of the other person, and not just thinking about what you are going to say next. Martin Buber set out and wrote his famous work about “I – thou” relationships when he came to realize the potency of listening. He wrote that we must relate to another person not as an object for exploitation, as an “it”, but as a “Thou”, a unique and precious human being. He summed up his philosophy about religion by saying that it entails responding to the call of another. “Above all, listening to both the silent and the spoken voices when one person speaks to another, so that together they can remove the barrier between two human beings.”

Perhaps this is why the shema is such an important prayer. It calls out to us, almost as if it shouting out to us, and demands that we listen and take notice of others. It implies a relationship to another.

There is a qualitative difference between the act of hearing and of seeing. Our sages observe and emphasize that it was no coincidence that at Sinai we heard God’s voice. We did not see Him. Some rabbis suggest this was because seeing leads to the desire to visualize an image, which could lead to idolatry. This is also why it is traditional to avert one’s eyes and not look at the kohanim when the Priestly Blessing is recited, because it is the act of hearing that is the key. Hearing evokes reflection and thought, connection between two, as well as the effort to follow and obey what was heard.

The Talmud makes a point of using the expression “*Ta u’shma*: Come and listen” when it wants us to pay close attention to something, or to prove a point. When the Talmud wants to introduce a definitive conclusion to a lengthy discussion, it says learn from this, using the words, *shema mina*, literally, hear from this.

A famous Jewish saying is that God endowed us with two ears and one mouth so that we would listen more than we would speak.

On Rosh Hashana, we come to shul to hear the sound of the shofar. In fact, the mitzvah is not the sounding of the shofar, but in hearing it. On Yom Kippur we recite many

prayers, but the major plea of these days is to listen, to hear and to heed. The beautiful Shma Kolenu prayer is a plea to God to hear our prayer. Yom Kippur beckons us to listen to the voices around us. That includes the voice of God and the still small voice within us.

It is best when we listen with more than just our ears, but with our hearts as well. When God appeared to King Solomon in the middle of the night and offered him any gift he wanted, the wise king asked for a “listening heart.”

It is my prayer that on this Yom Kippur we learn the meaning of shema, to hear -- to hear more closely the cry of anguish of the less fortunate among us; to hear the voices of our children who cry out for our love and attention. We need to hear the words of our spouses and loved ones and to become more attentive to their needs.

We need to hear the urgency of the cry to do something about Darfur and injustice in the world, to hear the pangs of hunger of the homeless and the impoverished, and not turn a deaf ear on the needy.

And let us listen, so that we can become better friends to each other. Let us listen so we hear the despair and loneliness of those we care about, the anger and anxieties, the defeats and disappointments of those who express these needs in anguished sighs as well as desperate cries. If we listen well we will even hear the silent cry for comfort and love.

Shma Kolenu: Let us hear, truly hear the voices around us.

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