

# Interbeing/Rosh Hashanah 5773

It was my version of the “Marlboro Man,” a solo trip into the Trinity Alps: just me, my dog Sarah, a backpack and a fly fishing rod. It was, I think 10 summers ago, and it began on a very hot July day. After almost 5 hours of driving, I was at the trailhead for Stuarts Fork, which is a tributary of the Trinity River. The trail follows the course of the river, a rolling mostly uphill climb in a gorge. It’s a rugged, rocky, forested place, with shafts of sun light pouring through the gaps of the dense stands of fir and pine trees that cover the steep slopes on either side of the river. I was drenched in sweat, 5 minutes into the trip. Walking, I could not help but notice the fallen trees and dead wood all around me. No wonder the ranger had told me that I was the last person they were giving a fire permit to this season.

As the sun began to set, I found a campsite up a small embankment from the rushing river below. After catching my dinner, I started a little fire in a fire ring, obviously used many times before. Seeing no reason for a tent, I pulled my sleeping bag from my pack and lay down next to the burning coals. Since there was no wind and the fire was so small – just some glowing coals – I decided to fall asleep by its soft, warm light; a mistake I will never make again!

I don’t know how long I was asleep, but I do remember what woke me up: Sarah, my 95lb Lab/Rhodesian mix was going berserk, barking, and howling like the world was about to end! “What is it?!” “What’s happening!” Well, I bet you can guess; somehow the fire had leapt from the ring of rocks it was in and ignited at the base of a pine tree at my feet. Flames were licking the upper branches; we were a few seconds from a total disaster!

The rest is a blur. Scooping earth up with my bare hands to try and snuff out the fire, running back and forth to the river with a cooking pot... Well, I am here, so you know I was able to put the fire out...

I was stunned; seconds away from starting a forest fire; seconds away from death. Oh my God! As time has passed what haunts me most is the realization that my carelessness almost resulted in a horrible, far-reaching chain of events I was completely unconscious of before the fire. Clueless of how interconnected my actions are to everyone and everything else. Think about it: If Sarah would not have woken me up, not only would I not be here but who knows how many thousands of acres would have burned, how many other people, other back packers, would have been caught unaware somewhere in that gorge or beyond it. What about the cabins and summer homes there? How about the firefighters who would have to respond; the wildlife killed, the natural habitats destroyed, the ash, the carbon added to the atmosphere, etc.

That is what haunts me to this day – how interconnected and interdependent we all are, without really knowing it.

Rosh Hashanah, the New Year is here. It is Yom Harat Olam, the Day of the World’s Inception, the Birthday of the World, a perfect time to gain a

new awareness of how much the world depends on us and us on the world. To focus our discussion we shall now turn to what is perhaps the single most important prayer in our liturgy – the Shemah. Shemah Yisrael...<sup>3</sup>

The Shemah has been called the “watch word of the Jewish people.” It is one of if not the single most important prayer in our liturgy yet, it defies any single translation or understanding.

Let’s start with the words: Hear O Israel, Y-H-V-H our God, Y-H-V-H is One. The p’shat, the most simple or straightforward reading of these words suggests a declaration of God’s oneness: monotheism.

We take this assertion for granted, but this idea – monotheism- is not selfevident; on the surface, the Greek pantheon with all its gods, their foibles

and their constant bickering, would better reflect our experience. With the Shemah, Judaism posits something profoundly different; one God speaks to the potential, not necessarily the reality of our experience. It’s as much about what can be as it is about what is; if God is one then we can be one. God’s oneness speaks to the potential for human harmony and wellbeing on a messianic scale. Think Bob Marley: “One love, One heart, let’s get together and feel alright...” I have always believed Bob Marley was a third world prophet...

Chutzpah of the Jewish people that we never gave up on the Shemah and what it stands for, never gave up on the promise of the future, the demands of the day – in exile, inquisition, concentration camp – we never gave up. That in itself is an important New Year’s message: to be a Jew is to live for the ideal, the best we and our world can be.

Let’s drill down a little deeper and look more closely at the words of the Shemah, especially God’s name Y-H-V-H which we don’t know how to 4 pronounce, or exactly what it means, though we do know it is a form of the verb “to be.” How about this translation:

Hear O Israel The Ground of all Being is our God, The Ground of All Being is One.

This reading of the Shemah is essentially a non-dualistic approach; God and Being are One of which we are a part.

The Shemah, in other words, is a declaration of the interconnectedness of all being. I have been saying the Shemah a couple times a day for years; it took a fire and yet another near death experience for me to really understand it’s meaning and its implications...

Do you know who felt our economic down turn first? Vietnam; the global market, for better or for worse, illustrates how interconnected we are. Yes, we can build factories around the globe, exploit their cheap labor, pollute their environments, but what we cannot do is act like toddlers who really believe that what they can’t see does not exist, does not affect us, is not our responsibility. “Shemah Yisrael...” Hear! Listen, we are all interconnected in a web of mutuality, whether we like it or not. The pollution we create in China or Mexico eventually finds its way to us, whether we like it or not, the exploitive labor practices that we export, eventually come back to bite us, whether we want to recognize them or not. 5

Listen to what Martin Luther King had to say some 44 years ago about the global problems we are now facing:

“The world in which we live is geographically one. The challenge that we face today is to make it one in terms of brotherhood....We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools. We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality...I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be...this is the way God’s universe is made, this is the way it is structured.” Martin Luther King could not have been more prescient.

Do you know where Bangladesh is? “Bangladesh, once poor and irrelevant to the global economy, is now an export powerhouse second only to China in global apparel exports.” (NYT, 8/23/12) Great for Bangladesh, right? Not if you are a worker in the apparel industry! You see, the “made in Bangladesh” label depends on having the lowest labor costs in the world; garment workers there make \$37 a month. We closed the sweatshops in this country almost a century ago. They are no more ok in Bangladesh today than they were in New York 100 years ago.

Traditionally you buy new clothes for the New Year. Next time you purchase that amazingly cheap Calvin Klien suit or Gap jeans, at least check out the label, see where it’s made.<sup>6</sup>

To hear the Shemah is at minimum to be awake and aware of the fact that as Martin Luther King so eloquently stated almost one half a century ago: “We are tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality...”. In other words, the Shemah is a call to moral responsibility on a global scale. Overwhelming for sure – it’s nearly impossible to avoid products produced in exploitive ways. Nevertheless, as our Tradition teaches, we are not obligated to finish the task of repairing the world, but nor are we at liberty to desist from trying. For sure, willful naiveté or simple unconscious behavior besides being irresponsible will just deepen the hole we are already in.

I am reminded of a midrash, an ancient Jewish teaching, about people traveling on a boat. Everyone buys a ticket, gets on board and takes their seat. Once the boat is on its way, a certain man takes out a long, sharp drill from his bag, and starts making a whole in the bottom of the boat where he sits. “What are you doing?!?” demands the others on the boat. “Why it is none of your business; this is my seat and I can do whatever I want with it!” Tic Nhat Han, well known Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, invented a word to describe how interconnected we are. It works exceptionally well Jewishly: “Interbeing”

“If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are...<sup>7</sup> If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the

sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow... And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper... And if we continue to look, we can see the logger who cut the tree and brought it to the mill to be transformed into paper. And we see the wheat. We know the logger cannot exist without his daily bread, and therefore the wheat that became his bread is also in this sheet of paper. And the logger's father and mother are in it too... Looking even more deeply, we can see we are in it too... So we can say that everything is in here with this sheet of paper. You cannot point out one thing that is not here – time, space, the earth, the rain, the minerals in the soil, the sunshine, the cloud, the river, the heat. Everything co-exists with this sheet of paper... “To be” is to interbe. You cannot just be by yourself alone. You have to inter-be with every other thing.”

Shemah Yisrael...

It is important to recognize that the implications of this vision of Oneness is not just environmental but rather they touch on the very root of human relations. For example, Israel will never be secure as long as there is no justice for the Palestinians and the Palestinians will never receive justice until they recognize the presence and humanity of Israelis. We in this country will forever struggle with immigration woes until we understand that the fortunes of the people living south of us are directly connected to our wellbeing, that the people cleaning our toilets and mowing our lawns have the same inalienable rights that we do.<sup>8</sup>

“We must all learn to live together as brothers, or we will all perish together as fools... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be... this is the way God's universe is made, this is the way it is structured.”

Judaism is a religion full of blessings and probably the best known of all of the “Baruch Atahs” that we say is “Motzi.” Baruch atah... Blessed are you Adonai, Ground of All Being who brings forth bread from the ground.”

Have you ever seen loaves of bread fly out of the ground?

There is a messianic flurry in “Motzi,” the idea that someday we will not have to toil for our bread, but beyond that, “Motzi” allows us not to bless the bread, the bread is the blessing, but rather to recognize the whole process that results in the bread. This is how one of my current bat mitzvah students, Koleah Bayen put it: “A farmer has to be born and raised so that he can plant the seeds and care for them. Someone has to harvest the grain with a machine, built by somebody else. Another person provides fuel for the machine, and yet another grinds the grain, makes it into bread and bags it. The truck driver delivers it to the store, and the grocery clerk sets it on the shelf. In the end, my mother buys the challah and brings it home. In the “Motzi,” we are thanking G-d this whole, perfectly working process.”

Traditionally we eat apples and honey to celebrate the New Year, the apple being symbolic for the world, the honey that we have a sweat year full of blessings. Now you know the deeper truth; the apple IS the world in as much <sup>9</sup> as we can recognize the myriad of blessings that the apple and the honey

represent.

A final word: the Alter Rebbe, the founder of Chabad Hassidism, taught that anyone for a moment could become a Tzaddik, a fully realized human being, while reciting the Shemah, by saying it with complete kavana.

What is a Tzadik? In short, a Tzadik is a perfected human being, fully awake, aware, in tune with the interconnectedness of all being in every way.

What a precious gift the Alter Rebbe is offering us – the oneness that seems so allusive, the sense of connection we struggle to realize is encoded in the words of the Shemah and more importantly, in the DNA of Creation.

Yes, the world can be One, there can be an end to war, violence, pollution, hunger. Our ancestors never gave up on that vision, why should we?

And, if we forget this essential truth, if we lose hope, vision, a sense of the promise of the future, all we have to do is recite these words ...Shemah Yisrael.....