

Shema – Listen Up

Rabbi Sruly Koval / Parshat Devarim / August 5, 2022

A few weeks ago, my oldest daughter Miriam and I went to Orlando for a few days. We are both big Harry Potter fans and we went to spend some father–daughter time at Harry Potter World in Universal Studios.

As you may recall from previous rambles, whenever I travel, my J–dar antenna is cranked up all the way. I'm always on the lookout for fellow tribesmen to "bagel." Admittedly, it's a bit of an obsession for me, and I was surprised when I didn't pick up any signs of fellow wandering Jews right away. Finally, towards the end of our first day there, as I was waiting for Miriam to finish up a roller coaster ride (I myself prefer to remain on terra firma), my Jewish Spidey sense started to tingle. I looked up and heard a middle–aged man speaking Hebrew to his son at a food concession stand.

We started talking, in Hebrew of course. Then Miriam found us and joined the conversation. In typical Israeli fashion, he starts to drill my daughter Miriam, a complete stranger, about her level of Jewish observance. He tells her very emphatically that she should be at least as religious as him: Shabbat evenings and the major Jewish holidays, and that's about it. Miriam took his advice in stride!

The day we left, we went glass–bottom canoeing on the Silver River at the Silver Springs State Park. Sam, our young tour guide, did an incredible job introducing us to all the wildlife in and around the crystal clear blue waters: exotic fish, baby alligators, dolphins, turtles and birds, oh my.

Halfway through the tour, Sam shared with us his personal story. His two passions are the waterways of Florida and religious philosophy, quite an interesting combination. He loves sharing his knowledge of the wonders of the freshwater ecosystem. Plus, he is a philosophy major at the University of Florida. When he realized that we were Jewish (he is not), he told us that his dream is to visit Israel one day, and then, out of the blue, he loudly started to chant the Shema! He actually pronounced the Hebrew words quite well. He told us that his philosophy professor had his class memorize it. Go figure! Both Miriam and I were astonished to hear the words of the Shema reverberate across the still jungle–like waters, from such an unexpected source.

Later that evening on the way home, I went looking for a quiet area in the airport to recite the evening prayers. The airport was quite busy, but at the end of the terminal, I found a relatively secluded spot at a gate and I sat down in a corner seat. The seat next to me was empty and I quietly started to recite the Ashrei prayer, taking pains to not disturb the lady sitting two seats over with her teenage children.

Shortly after I began, I noticed that the lady looked up with a "deer in the headlights" look. I then realized that she was speaking Hebrew to her kids. So that's why she was so surprised to hear me praying in Hebrew. The last thing she was expecting was a religious-looking man praying in Hebrew next to her in the Orlando airport.

When I finished my prayers I made small talk with them. A thought then dawned upon me: I will probably never see this woman again, and this might actually be one of the few times that she and her children ever connect with an observant Jew in real time. I felt like I should share some parting message with them. So I told them the story of how a young, Israel-loving Christian tour guide chanted the Shema to us in Hebrew in the still waters of Ocala, Florida. They were all impressed with the story, and before we parted ways, this secular Israeli mom respectfully wished me in Hebrew that may G-d answer all of our prayers.

In the Shema we recite the words, "*uve-lechtecha va-derech*," that you should take the Shema prayer with you on your travels. Perhaps there is a deeper meaning here as well. Wherever a Jew travels, he or she is not alone. The message of the Shema reverberates throughout the world and it guides us as we encounter unique people and places that we are meant to interact with, and (hopefully) inspire. Americans, Israelis, Jews, Christians, nature and wildlife. They are all part of our unique and complex spiritual ecosystem, and it is our job to gather the sparks of holiness wherever we travel.