

Keith Satter *D'var Torah*
Va-Ethannan--She'ma
Beth El, July 24, 2021

Today is a special Shabbat with a special name. It is called “*Shabbat Nachamu*” as *Nachamu*, meaning “comfort,” is the first word of the haftarah. *Nachamu* is always the first Shabbat after *Tisha B'Av*. It is the first of seven haftarot that move us away from the anxiety of *Tisha B'Av* and provide us with messages of hope and strength. These *haftarot* are no longer directly connected to the *parshiot* but are intended solely to prepare us for the upcoming High Holidays.

Yet, despite the fact that that today's *haftarah* is not directly connected to our *parsha*, there is an important part of our *parsha*, *Va'etchanan*, that also serves to help us focus on the the meaning of *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*.

Va'etchanan continues Moses' discourse to the Jewish People.

Let me quickly set the scene. The children of Israel are encamped just shy of the Promised Land. They are the first generation of the Israelites who were slaves in Egypt. But by now all the former slaves have died and it is their children who are set to go into the Promised Land. Moses is in his last month of his life. He knows he will not be making this final leg of the trip and uses the occasion, along with the rest of the book of Deuteronomy, to give his final words to the people.

This morning I want to focus on just six words.

We are obligated to say them twice each day, “When we rise up and when we lie down.” Hence, we speak them during the *Shacharit* (morning) and *Ma'ariv* (evening) services.

On *Shabbat* we additionally speak these words during the introductory prayers, when we take out the *Torah*, and during *Musaf*. Of course, I am referring to: *She'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*. It's translated a few ways, but basically, "Hear, Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

These six words are the cornerstone of our faith.

We are commanded: "You shall teach these words diligently to your children." And we do so at a young age, as they form an essential bond between Jews and their God. My Jewish learning journey this past month has been exploring these six words and I want to take you on some of the stops I have made.

First, while Moses says these words in Deuteronomy, a *midrash* traces them back to Genesis and the final conversation between Jacob and his sons. Jacob is on his deathbed afraid that his sons will stray from his religious practices, that they will start to worship idols. His sons turn to Jacob, who is also known as "Israel," and say to him, "Hear (listen to me), Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." They are basically affirming to Jacob that they will continue to worship Jacob's singular God.

The next thing I learned was when you search *Sefaria.org*, the online collection of Jewish literature, and type the word "She'ma" into the search bar, some 2,400 passages appear. Many of them come from the *Gemara* (Talmud) and deal with proper time to say the *She'ma* and whether you can say it in a language other than Hebrew.

The commentator, Rambam (Maimonides), in his text, *Sefer HaMitzvos*, places the *She'ma* at almost the top of the list of commandments. Here, he lists the commandments in a logical order starting with those that are central to the practice of Judaism.

Primary is the commandment to believe in God, which is the first of the Ten Commandments. “I am the Lord your God.” The second and third on Rambam’s list are related to the text of the *She’ma*, where we are told to acknowledge the oneness of God and to love him. Rambam also comments on the centrality of the *She’ma* in that the *Torah* places it **immediately** after the Ten Commandments.

But I am drawn back to Moses standing before the Jewish people. Moses is using all of his rhetorical skills to convince the people that even though they will be entering a land where idol worship is the custom, they must stay true to the one God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, gave them the law, and helped them win battle after battle.

Now, it wouldn’t be a Satter *D’var Torah* without a connection to some other literature, so here it comes. I couldn’t help but think of the book *Tuck Everlasting*. This is a simple story of the Tuck family who discovered a stream in the late 1800s. However, this stream has magic power and the Tucks find themselves with everlasting life. It sounds wonderful until you consider the various implications. Outliving your family, day after day the same, and so on. Decades later they meet a young girl, Winnie Foster, who sees one of them drinking from the stream. They plead with her not to tell anyone. The father, Angus Tuck, tries to convince her not to drink from the stream. He says to her, “You have to understand, you just have to!”

Now, let’s go back to Moses and the *She’ma*. He is standing before the Isrealites exhorting them to remember their God and God’s commandments. He and God know that idolatry is a seductive path. You want rain, you pray to the rain god. You want children, you pray to the fertility god.

To be Jewish is not so simple. You need to be ethical and God knows this is a difficult path to take.

Moses basically says the same thing as Angus Tuck. Children, you have to understand. So he says, Hear, Oh Israel (this time is not talking about Jacob, but the children of Israel), this supreme being, *Adonai*, is our God, and he alone is God. No multiple gods.

The *Torah* wants us to appreciate the passion of Moses so much, that even in the script of the *Torah* we see something different.

According to Rokeach in his commentary, *Kol Bo*, if one looks at the actual text of the *She'ma*, something stands out. The letter *ayin* in *She'ma* and the letter *dalet* in *echad* are in larger script, both in the *Torah* and most prayer books. These two letters spell *AiD*, witness, symbolizing that by our recitation of the *She'ma*, we bear witness to God's Oneness.

When we hold services, there is a part I particularly enjoy--the call-and-response. The *Ashrei* is the best example. The leader says the first line and the congregation responds with the second. It takes on a rhythm of its own. After saying to the people *She'ma, Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*, there is no mention of any response. No one -- like the Southern Baptists -- saying, "You go, Moses" or even repeating his words. And that's a little sad. He is preaching his heart out and not getting a response. But centuries later, we attempt to keep this link intact twice each day. But it requires work on our part.

The *Shulchan Aruch*, our main code of Jewish law, teaches us that "one who recites the *She'ma*, but did not have the [proper] intention in the first six words has not fulfilled his obligation." We have all recited the *She'ma* thousands of times.

But how often do we actually think about it? How many times are we distracted by an idle thought or another entry on the “to-do” list?

As we now begin to prepare for the High Holidays, here’s a thought about proper intention while saying the shema. On *Yom Kippur*, during the *Ne’ila* service, as the sun reaches the tops of the trees and the Gates of Heaven begin to close, what do we say? The *She’ma*. In fact, it has its own special melody for that portion of the service, (Singing) *She’ma Yisrael, Adonai Elohanu, Adonai Echad*. Those words bring the High Holidays to a dramatic close. Maybe we can think about this idea of intent as we say the *She’ma* in the next few weeks.

And, in just a few minutes we will have our first opportunity as the *She’ma* is part of the Musaf service. Let’s all imagine that we are speaking to our father, Jacob, (or have just listened to Moses) 1,000 years apart, but the same common idea: Their one god is our one god. *She’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad!*

Shabbat Shalom.