

## Reflection on the Shema

My grandmother was twenty-seven. She was holding a bag, and she was holding my mother, who was two. It was 1942 in Central Poland. They were on a firing squad line about to be shot with four other women and one other child.

I return to that moment every time I hear the Shema, or say it, or watch my daughters say it. I return to that moment because my grandmother said to me:

“We were first in line to be shot. **I had the Shema on my lips.** But they started to shoot from the other end of the line. I dropped my bag, held onto Esther, and ran.”

She ran into an abandoned building and up to the third floor where they spent the night. It's a long story. I'll jump ahead to say that my grandmother, Nadja, lived for fifty more years and died between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur in 1992.

How much time do we have before we die? What will we do in that time? When my grandmother thought she had only seconds left, she began to speak the Shema. Why?

Was it to pray, to reaffirm her connection to the universe with her last breath? Or was it an act of defiance, of proudly affirming her identity as Jewish, as other, at the very moment she was being executed for being just that? Was it a goodbye, an acceptance of her imminent death? Or was it a staunch refusal of death, a “No, not yet”? Was it all of those things at once?

Did the words of the Shema somehow move from her lips to her feet? Did those words help her run? Did they help her hold onto her daughter? Did the words of the Shema help her live—that day, and other days?

Shema yisrael adonai elohaynu adonai echad

I know there's a lot of commentary about what those words mean. For me, they're about what it means to be alive in the face of death. They're about what we do with the time we have left, whether that's five seconds or five decades.

That's the Reflection on the Shema that I've been reading here for some years now. Sometimes I feel drawn to add something, and this year I want to fill in some of the story, so that I can acknowledge a few of the helpers.

In the documentary, "Won't you be my neighbor?" Fred Rogers explains that when he was a child, and terrible things happened, his mother would tell him to "look for the helpers." I need to look for the helpers these days, and I think we should be ready **to be** the helpers, in ways we might not be able to imagine right now.

My grandmother was so brave to run away from a firing squad line that day in 1942. But she, my grandfather, and my mother did not survive the war in Poland without the help of others. In one telling of the firing squad story, as my grandmother ran away with my mother, they passed an armed soldier who let them go by and did not shoot them. He was a helper.

Shortly after the firing squad incident, my mother was separated from her parents. (Separating a child from her parents does affect the child for the rest of her life.) My mother ended up in a Catholic orphanage run by nuns who pretended not to know that they had some Jewish children in their care. They were helpers.

And my grandparents were kept hidden and cared for by some very courageous and loving helpers, the Tworek family in Piotrkow Tribunalski. Mr. Tworek built an underground hiding place beneath the outdoor dog kennel in their yard, where my grandparents crouched for two years, coming out only at night to use the bathroom. The Tworeks, who had four teenagers at the time (one of whom I met), became like parents to my grandparents, whose own parents had been killed.

Thank you to the helpers, then and now and still to come.