

Let me take you back: It's the aftermath of World War II, mid-1940's, Youth Aliyah workers from Israel circulate among the refugees in Europe's displaced persons camp, looking for Jewish children who had lost everything. They meet destitute young orphans who have no conscious memory of their early homes or prewar lives. How to know if they are Jewish? The workers say to them each child in turn: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad*. A flicker of recognition appears on a young face! They have found another Jewish child to bring home to the Land of Israel."¹

Flash forward a few decades. As a rabbi, I visit at the bedsides of elderly Jews who seem lost in their own worlds, not responding to anything I say. But when I sing the Shema, they brighten and sing along with me.

What is the power of this six word prayer that is among the first words taught to Jewish children, the prayer that Jews aspire to make our last words? The Shema, from the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4), encapsulates in one sentence the essence of the Jewish mission in the world. (Yes, the full Shema has three biblical paragraphs that go after it, but for now we will focus on six Hebrew words of the first line). The odd thing about the Shema is that it's a prayer that isn't exactly a prayer. Think about it: who is it addressing? Not God, but us, Israel: Listen Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one. It is calling on us, more a declaration of belief than a plea or a praise.

Look in your Machzor, your holiday, prayer book, page 154, to see an example of the Shema. Look closely and you will notice that the *ayin*—the last letter in Shema, and the *dalet*, the last letter in Echad, are written extra big. It's the same in every Torah scroll, too, even more obvious. One reason for this is that those two letters together spell out a word, “Ed,” meaning “witness.”

¹ http://www.hebroots.org/hebrootsarchive/9710/971029_h.html

When we say the “Shema,” we are witnesses to our most profound truths as Jews. What are we witnessing?

Let’s unpack those six words, one by one:

Shema: Listen! Hearken! Understand!

Deep listening is the beginning of making peace and creating a better world. That’s a profound truth that I learned from my friends and mentors, Len and Libby Traubman. I had begun to write this sermon and quote Len, when I got the sad news that he passed away unexpectedly at the age of 80, between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. I hope that this sermon will be a tribute to him that elevates his already exalted soul. Len was a pediatric dentist (the best kind of people!) in San Mateo California, and his wife Libby, may she merit long life, was in social work. But their real profession was being *lamed-vavniks* (those humble righteous people who sustain the world, who we’ve been learning about this season).

Life changed for the Traubmans 50 years ago, in 1969. I didn’t know this until now, but the two things changed their life trajectory that year were the birth of their first child, and seeing an image of our earth from outer space, the very photograph that I mentioned on Rosh Hashanah, that Reb Zalman called the most important religious icon of our age. Motivated by this radical new perspective, the Traubmans became global citizens. They devoted their lives to dialogue, from Cold War citizen diplomacy between Americans and Russians, to the Middle East, to Africa, and to their own California neighborhood. They started the first and longest lasting Palestinian-Jewish living room dialogue group, that inspired many others, including one that I started in San Antonio with a Palestinian Muslim Imam, which had impact on thousands of Jewish educators who came to San Antonio for the Conference on Alternatives in Jewish Education. The Traubmans constantly shared hopeful news of peace and made connections between people around the world, and it all started with one idea: LISTEN to others, HEAR their stories. By doing so you turn a stranger and potential enemy into a friend.

Len described it like this: “What is distinctive about dialogue as a way of communication is very different than ‘conversation’ which is shallow, conversational, and usually pretty safe. And ‘discussion’ which is like percussion--

batting a ping-pong ball back and forth, waiting for what I want to say. And it is definitely not ‘debate’ which is I win, you lose; we learn nothing; and we become further apart. Dialogue has a really new quality of listening and listening to learn, not waiting for what I'm going to say next. And what it does is it dignifies both people. It dignifies the listener and it dignifies the person who is being listened to.”

How much we need this approach to dialogue right now! The word Shema and the Shema prayer call us to live our lives as deep listeners, bridging gaps and increasing understanding. Reb Zalman adds that the big letter *Ayin* in the word “Shema” tells us to see as well as to hear. That’s because the word “*ayin*” means, “eye.” So the word Shema is telling us to open our ears to hear others, to listen to their stories, *and* to open our eyes wide to see others.

The second words: Yisrael / Israel. That’s us. We are the children of Jacob, whose name was changed to Israel. One Midrash holds that the real first time the Shema was recited was when Jacob/Israel’s sons said it to him on his deathbed: “Listen Israel—listen Dad—we are all faithful to the covenant and we all declare that God is one.” And then he answered “Thank G-d! Praise the one whose glory fills all time and space -*Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto Le’olam Va’ed.*” You probably recall that Jacob got his name changed to Israel when he wrestled with an angel. Rabbi Arthur Waskow translates *Yisrael* as “God-wrestler.”

Shema Yisrael: As Jacob-Israel’s heirs, we are bidden to see and hear, and then to struggle mightily on God’s behalf to make a better world.

Words three and four: *Adonai Eloheynu*, are usually translated, “The Lord is Our God.” But really, the meaning is much deeper. Start with Adonai. We say Adonai (“our Lord”), but that’s really just a substitute word for the original four letter name of God from the Torah: *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey*, a name tradition says is too holy for us to pronounce. It’s not about a childish image of an old man in the sky. The four letter Divine name could mean: “I will be what I will be” - all tenses past-present-future – undefinable – the awesome ungraspable life force that fills and creates our world without ceasing. And at the same time, those four letters *Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey* are intimate. They are the sounds of breathing, especially when we pronounce the Vav as a Wav, as it was in ancient times. Y-H-W-H. Rabbi Arthur Waskow calls the Four Letter Name of God, “the Breath of Life.”

And then, *Eloheynu*, Our God, “Our *Elohim*.” In Biblical Hebrew, *Elohim* can mean both God and Judge. In mystical thought, *Elohim* can mean the immanent God, that experience of divinity we sense close to us, filling our world and all of nature, the *Shechinah*. Jewish mystics pointed out that in Gematria, Hebrew numerology, *Elohim* is equivalent to *Ha-Teva*, nature.

Word Five: We come back to Adonai: YHWH, the paradox of God, utterly transcendent and beyond us, yet as close as our breath, our life spirit...

and this time we affirm:

Adonai Echad! God is ONE: *Echad!* Which can mean there is only one God. It can also mean that God is totally unique. And it implies: God is a Unity and therefore we are all part of a great Unity. Ultimately all of us are one, all connected. “One, every single one, each one joined and united in the One.”

So *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheynu, Adonai Echad*: Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One, can be understood more fully: Listen and see, you wrestlers for God! YHWH, the indefinable, transcendent, divine life force—that’s our God! This is our ultimate measure, the only thing that can we judge life by. And that same, un-namable God, that breath of all life—is ONE, is a unity, and therefore nothing is outside it and we are all part of a whole!”

Or to make it simpler, we can just say: Hashtag #essence of Judaism in six words.

So think now, if we would truly live our lives bearing witness to the meaning of the Shema, the essence of our faith, what would that mean every day:

To really listen,

To really see,

To declare for all the world that the mystery of creation fills everything and all,

And that ultimately we are all one in the one!

How would that change how we deal with:

People who look different? Have different opinions? The needy, the poor, the immigrant? The person you walk by on the street? How would it change how we regard: Endangered species? Trees and bird and animals? Our whole world?

I would like to conclude with a simple but powerful Shema exercise that Reb Zalman taught us. We will say that first line of the Shema five times, and each time address it to someone else.

First The traditional way, imagining as if you are hearing Moses say the Shema for the first time. He said God's actual name, but since we no longer pronounce that aloud, you could say "Adonai," or "Yah." ...

Now proclaim the Shema to yourself, to your own name, Hebrew or English. For example: Shema Julie! Or Shema Yehudit Tovah! (I will do it really loud so don't feel self-conscious). ...

Now offer the Shema to someone else, someone you want to hear this essential message, to one person or a group. Like: "Shema my grandchildren"
Think for a moment who needs the message. ...

Now back to the traditional words, but this time as if it's your last Shema, like you are pouring out your soul. We can think of all the Jews who said these words word with their last breath, and join with them.

Finally, once more, with all the intentions held together. . . .

Baruch Shem Kevod Malchuto Le'olam Va'ed! "Through time and space, your glory shines, Majestic One." (Reb Zalman's Translation).

When we say the Shema tonight at Ne'ilah, or when you say it at home before bed, or you say it in Shul, remember these six words bear witness to the essence of our faith. May we merit not only to **say** them but to **live** by them: to listen and wrestle and affirm the unity behind all diversity.

Amen.

It's our Yom Kippur tradition to hear Mitzvah Messages:

Leslie Mack, PCS Tikkun Olam/Social Action chair

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