



Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

“Listen, Israel!”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is a passage which finds a central place in Jewish liturgy. The first verse (6:4), known as the Shema (meaning ‘Listen’ or ‘hear’), is perhaps the most frequently recited verse by Jews in the whole bible. In the prayer life of an observant Jew it is recited twice a day, morning and evening.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone (Deut.6:4, NRSV).

Listen, Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one (Deut.6:4, see Friedman).

Read both these translations a few times, aloud, slowly. How does God’s Word speak to your heart in an initial reading?

The Book of Deuteronomy is presented as a series of speeches by Moses, just prior to his death, as he looks back and tells the story of the Israelites’ epic trek through the desert. Those events are over. The Israelites are about to enter the promised land. All that remains is the memory of the desert events and the meaning of them. All that remains are the words that remind us of the wilderness story and the commandments to be fulfilled. And so, says Moses, ‘Listen...’ Can we sense the drama, the power of this word, and all that hinges on it?

The fluidity of the Hebrew language allows for the latter part of v.4 to be translated as either ‘The Lord alone’ or ‘The Lord is one.’ Thus two key emphases emerge: Israel’s sole worship of God and the oneness of God.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (6:5). Commentators note that, reflecting the language of ancient political treaties, the verb ‘to love’ implies not just an emotion but the commitment of one’s actions. To love God calls for total loyalty and dedication.

“Which commandment is the first of all?” asks a scribe in Mark’s Gospel. Jesus answers by quoting the Shema: *“Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one...”* (Mark 12:29). Where else do we find echoes of the Shema in the New Testament? Can we hear, for instance, soundings of the Shema in the voice of the apostle Paul: *“Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist...”* (1 Cor. 8:6). As Christians, our faith is built on a foundational belief in God’s unchallenged sovereignty over, and loving care for, all creation. And where is that foundation laid? In the faith of the Jewish people, summed up in the Shema.

During World War II, hundreds of Jewish parents placed their infant children, for their own safety, into the care of non-Jewish

families or monasteries. After the war, a concern for the Jewish community was to locate its ‘lost’ Jewish child-survivors, many now living in church-run institutions and too young to remember their Jewish upbringing. The story is told of one Rabbi who, with the permission of a Polish Catholic orphanage, greeted the children, then sang the words of the Shema, upon which a number of the children began to weep, and to cry out ‘Mama!’ ‘These children are Jewish,’ said the Rabbi. He had no doubt that among the last words they had heard from their mothers’ lips, before the moment of separation, was the Shema.

Reflection

Shema! ‘Listen!’ Discuss the centrality of listening in a life of prayer, of faith, of family, of love.

“You shall love the Lord your God...” The sages of Israel wrestled with the question: if the Shema is a commandment, how is it possible to ‘command’ love? Should not one’s love of God be marked by spontaneity? How would you enter this discussion? Note that in the context of Jewish liturgy the Shema is always preceded by a declaration of God’s love.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (NY, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2003); www.jewishencyclopedia.com; www.aish.com. Scripture quotations: NRSV (unless indicated otherwise).