

## RE-VISIONING THE SHMA: A NEW INTERGENERATIONAL OATH?

A near universal faith refrain of Jewish prayer – one whose familiarity spans a vast continuum of Jewish commitments, perspectives, and people – is Deuteronomy 6:4:

*Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad.*  
Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

This verse and three other biblical passages were developed by the early rabbinic sages into the Shma, a core statement of faith and praise for God. The Rabbis most likely inherited some form of the Shma from much earlier Jewish communities and traditions, as far back as Moses. They shaped it into the preeminent declaration of faith in the one universal and indivisible God by Whose word the Jewish people lives, and for Who, we would be willing to be martyred, if forced to do so. This first line alone wraps into a tight verbal bundle the ageless, fiercely resilient Jewish commitment to God, along with the intense emotions and bloody history attached to it.

This being the case, it intrigues me deeply that the ancient Rabbis employed that first line for a dramatic re-telling about the first family of the Jewish people, Jacob and sons. According to the Torah, Jacob, our founder whose name was changed to Israel (“God-wrestler”) before his encounter with his

estranged brother, Esau, did not lead the most exemplary life. He suffered so long and mightily for his foibles, that at age 130, he told his host, the Egyptian Pharaoh, "Few and hard have been the years of my life."

Enter the death-bed scene, Genesis 49, in which Israel is reunited with his most-loved, and by now more grown up, son Joseph, viceroy of Egypt. He is ready to die at 147 years of age. His twelve sons, the progenitors of the Jewish people, are gathered around him for the last time. We the faithful readers cannot resist making this family's goodbye a mirror for our own partings from parents and children, those that happened and those we imagine. Strangely, Israel doesn't bring up the monstrous elephant in the room: the sons' long-ago sale into Egyptian bondage of brother Joseph. This heinous act of filial rage and sibling hatred was redeemed only by Joseph's rise to power through God's intervention, an accession that saved the world from starvation during famine. Wouldn't you think that papa would at least allude to this drama? Instead, he launches into praise and condemnation of each adult child for character flaws, past indiscretions and outrages, and superlative traits that will make their descendants superlative tribes of Israel.

This is the juncture at which the Rabbis incorporate the Shma into their pious reconstruction of the patriarch's last moments. In their retelling, Israel says goodbye in an altogether different manner. He and his boys are gathered around the death-bed, each of them chastened into piety by the old man's ruminations, all of them knowing full well that their past is neither past nor prologue: as a family they will weather togetherness and tragedy so many more times, with their familial ghosts firmly clinging to their backs. Still, they have come this far, and they are still so close, a cause for family celebration. Channeling rabbinic religious aspirations, Israel pleads with his twelve sons: "I'm worried that I'll die and you'll stop serving the one God Who brought us through this mess." To a man, the sons ring out in unison their reassurance:

*Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad.*

Listen, Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One!

"Dad, stop worrying...close your eyes...rest and sleep your final sleep. The religion and its future are safe in our hands."

In one brilliant stroke of interpretive screenwriting, Israel the nation becomes Israel the dying founder. Moses' admonition of fierce faith to us Jews is placed in the mouths of our ancestors who preceded Moses. Acting in our behalf, they become surety for the Jewish future.

This is a dramatic and insightful rabbinic strategy for engaging our rambunctious Jewish audience around the question of Jewish continuity. However, what makes it problematic is that it feels artificial. It presents us with two rigid, polarized choices: either you loyally conform to the “faith of the fathers” or you reject Judaism, and with it your good standing in the Jewish people. Conformity or conflict, with nothing in between that reflects the complex pluralism with which Jews have historically been Jewish. This false dichotomy is particularly fraught in our present reality, one in which so many young Jews engage Judaism, Jewishness, Israel, and Zionism in such radically diverse ways.

As a traditional Jew and rabbi, I have learned the slow, hard way that the simple act of engagement is its own form of Jewish loyalty, its own Shma declaration. Our agreements or disagreements about religion, politics, or Zionism notwithstanding, not one of the young people I parent, mentor, teach, or minister to is compelled to connect to anything Jewish. No rabbinocracy, federation, official church, or state apparatus tells them, “Be Jewish and be it this or that way”. Their choices to be actively Jewish at all, including confronting the establishment with tough and at times threatening questions and ideas, tells me that they aren’t interested in leaving our game: they’re interested in playing it hard and fast, at times changing its rules, yet at all times playing it *with us*. This

doesn't mean that they always understand those rules; and there are too many times when I find myself frustrated when they can be just as deaf and doctrinaire about politics, ideas and religion as the leaders they critique. Still, their willingness to stay engaged with the Jewish present is astounding to me.

I am thankfully not on my own deathbed, yet I'm ever anxious about whether Judaism, particularly in the diaspora, will sound its own death knell. I try not to despair. In what I hope are respectful conversations, I ask my Jewish people, all types of Jews, the dramatic question: what will you do when I and my generation are gone? Some of them are tragically so disconnected that they can't even hear what I'm saying. Yet when I listen carefully, I'm blessed to hear so many others responding:

"Listen, Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is One...in the many ways that we will choose."

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