

When I was a kid, there was a man in the congregation who reminded me of a polar bear or Santa Claus. For the sake of the High Holidays, we will stick with a polar bear. Paul, I think his name was, must have been 6'4 and round- very round. This was the late 70's and he always wore a t-shirt, a pair of overalls and Birkenstocks to services. Paul had a large mane of flowing white hair and an even longer flowing white beard. Behind his round glasses there were twinkling brown eyes. Paul impressed me for his size and his religious fervor. He would sing each prayer with eyes closed, banging on his *Siddur* so that those around him seemed to shake with vibrations. And when we came to the *Shema*- he seemed something otherworldly. Paul would swing his large *Tallit* almost up to the ceiling, wrap it about his own hoary head, and stand completely still. After all the motion of the other prayers, his stillness for the *Shema* was a bit unsettling. We could almost see him concentrating on each and every word. And in the meditative chant that the congregation used, he pronounced every syllable, especially the last *dalet- shema yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. When I saw him recite the *Shema*- I thought it was the most important of prayers, and for a time, he the most important of prayers. He reminded me of pictures of Abraham Joshua Heschel or even that God that sat on the throne in *shamaym l'malah*. But it was just Paul, transformed by the six most important words of our tradition.

Judaism always stresses doing, but the watchword of our faith focuses on something different: listening. Not just hearing but active listening. Rather than a prayer, which is addressed to God, the *Shema* is addressed to us, a reminder to be open to God, to hear the words directed to us from *Adonai*. In Judaism, to listen is as important as to speak, perhaps more so. To hear is as vital to human life, as to express oneself. Dialogues consist of both speaking and listening and become pointless when one of the parties stops listening to the other. Worship, as well, becomes pointless when either party turns a deaf ear to the other. God listens to us; we too need to listen to God.

We learn in the Book of Exodus that, "you yourself saw that I (God) spoke to you from the very heavens" (Exodus 20:19). Through reading Torah, through prayer, one understands that the concept of revelation is still occurring; the voice of God can be

heard. Perhaps God does not speak to us directly with a voice, as God did with our ancestors. But God does speak, if we are open to the message.

The Shema is not only the most well-known section of the prayer service it is also the most ancient. It was recited daily by the priests during the time of the first Temple as part of their Temple service. And later, during the Second Temple period, it was read privately at least twice a day. When there was a quorum of male adults- a *minyan*- the Shema was not merely read, it was proclaimed. The leader, usually the High Priest would proclaim the first crucial line: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad* while holding a Torah dramatically above his head open to the section in Deuteronomy where the Shema is found. This proclamation was a reenactment of the original moment when God spoke those words to the people, a reminder to “hear” and to do.

In the ancient first century town square, a messenger would proclaim an edict of the king and affix it to the wall or the post, much like a modern day mezuzah. The edict would be read twice a day with the words of the *Shema*- as if it had never been heard before. Upon hearing the message, the people would respond “*Baruch Shem Kavod Malchuto L'Olam Va'ed.*” May God’s glorious name be Majestic forever.

This method of publicly proclaiming the *Shema* twice daily was abandoned, possibly as a result of the Roman persecutions in the second century CE, when public practice of Judaism was forbidden. Jews continued to say the *Shema* but quietly. Once the practice of proclaiming the *Shema* stopped, the purpose of the response was no longer valid. There can be no response when nothing is said. Legends grew around the recitation of the *Shema*. The best known is Jacob’s response to his sons when they assured him of their belief in one God.

Jacob called his children together when he was about to depart this world and said to them, “Do you have any doubts within your heart about God who spoke and the world came into being?” They said to him, “Just as you have no doubts in your heart about the God who spoke and the world came into being, so we have no doubts about God. Rather- hear O Israel! The Lord is our God! The Lord is One. Jacob gave thanks that no unworthy children had come from him and said, “Blessed is the name of the Glorious

majesty forever and ever. The Holy One said to him, “Jacob all your life you wanted this- that your children should recite the *Shema* morning and evening.”

This ancient legend adds a very poignant dimension to what otherwise appears to be a rather austere public declaration. The words of this Midrash say something different. “Israel” means not the people of Israel, but the person Israel- the father of our people- another name for Jacob- the first of our patriarchs who truly wrestled with God. Jacob, who had more than one son, had the worries of every parent. Will my children carry on my religious tradition? Will they teach the words of the *Shema* to the next generation? Will it have meaning? Will my progenitors still hear God? Will they hear each other? Six words, six words- that lead to more questions and have provoked war in the name of God- whose God is the one? Which Israel is being addressed: the people as a whole or individuals, not only from Jews looking out but others looking in. Six simple words with myriad levels of understanding.

I would like to explore two ways of looking at the *Shema* – the first in relation to the people Israel and the state of Israel. The second concerning our personal ability to listen to God. Heeding the words of the *Shema*, and comprehending their true meaning can only create better people in a better world.

**One: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* - Hear, people Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one---- hearing the message of the One who harkens. A model for the world.**

There once was a family. A father, two sons, maybe more, two wives, maybe more. Like all families, this one shares a story. They are people who lived in the same house, ate the same breakfast, and went on the same holidays. They are people who lived together day in and day out- yet when you ask each family member to recount their story- their history, you would swear that they came from different planets. Isaac and Ishmael would tell you that their father sacrificed them both, while Abraham would see the *Akedah* and leaving Ishmael in the desert as acts of faith. Sarah would say that Hagar wronged her. Hagar would say that she was an innocent victim of Sarah’s jealousy. And all would be right.

In some families, the telling of stories leads to laughter - listening to each other speak is bonding - bringing one closer to another. In other families- like the descendents of Abraham and Isaac, these mis-memories lead to hurt, rage and violence. He loved you best. She left you the good china. I never want to see you or speak with you again. I hate you. I'm going to kill you. The telling of the story and its results depend on whether different family members can truly listen to each other, or whether they are only able to hear their own voice.

Rabbi Arthur Wascow teaches that "it takes two eyes, set a few inches apart, for human beings to see the world with depth and perspective. With one eye, the world looks flat. With two eyes too far apart the separate visions cannot blend. If you close your left eye, and the right eye insists that the world it sees is the truth, and then you close your right eye and the left eye insists its vision is the exclusive truth, then you are in trouble. You lose perspective not only visually, but also emotionally, intellectually and spiritually." The same is true for our ears. When we listen with the left, we miss what is happening on our right side and vice versa. We get only half the story.

Here is the Biblical truth about our past- the only facts we really can cull from the text: Abraham had at least two different wives: with that everyone can agree. Yet one branch of the family- ours- claims that Hagar was only a concubine while the other- Islam- sees her as a full privileged wife. Some even claim the third wife- Keturah- smoky. There were at least two sons. Ishmael, father of the Arab nations and our ancestor Isaac. Ishamel, the elder was born to Hagar- the stranger, the concubine. Isaac, the first of Sarah, is Abraham's adored son, the only one whom he loves- as the text makes abundantly clear. Both sons have names related to hearing: Ishmael- God hears- related to the outcry of his mother Hagar when she pleaded for water for her dying son, and Yitzhak- laughter- Sarah's laughter upon hearing that Abraham would have a son at a late age. Both sons are ultimately sacrificed psychologically by their father: Ishmael in the desert, Isaac on Mount Moriah. Both are given the blessing of land and progeny. They have more in common than any other set of brothers in Genesis, and yet there is no love between them, rather indifference.

A rare apathy when you consider the other brother relationships explored in the Torah. Cain kills Abel. Esau tries to kill Isaac. Joseph's brothers throw him in a pit and sell him for profit. And yet, somewhere along the line, some of the descendants of Ishmael have turned against the descendants of Isaac with passionate hatred.

As peoples, we have turned from each other- not able to even speak aloud our commonality. One on one, *panim el panim* conversations between Israelis and Palestinians occur. We saw and discussed one such relationship in the documentary "Behind Enemy Lines" viewed on *selichot*, where an Israeli policeman befriended a Palestinian journalist and tried to teach the situation from each other's point of view. The Parent's Circle, mothers of murdered Palestinian children killed in military attacks and mothers of murdered Israeli children killed in terrorist bombings join in mourning and meet at women's conferences around the world. At one such conference, held last January by the Dead Sea, the women, some dressed in chadors, some in pantsuits spoke not about anger, or revenge, or justice. They spoke simply about how it was the other- the mother of the Israeli son, the mother of the Palestinian daughter whose presence, understanding, mutual grief and listening brought peace and healing to them. All agreed that the conflict had to end for both of their sakes. All of them agreed that in the face of the other that they had seen the results of violence being done in their names. These women are light years away from the political concerns of the militant groups. But somehow, they had traveled back in time- Sarah and Hagar- to mourn for their lost sons Isaac and Ishmael.

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*- Hear Ones who follow the Divine, our God is the same. Whether we call God *Adonai* or *Eloheinu* or *Allah* or *Raab*. Whether we call God *Al-Racheem- El HaRachamim* (God of Compassion), *Al- Malik, El Melech* (God the King), or *Al Hakim, El HaDin* (God of judgement) the message is the same. We are all on this earth to hear each other- truly listen and make each other stronger. Most Israelis know this. Many moderate Arabs know this, although they have not said it publically. It is time for the moderate Arabs (wherever they may be) to face the Israelis, *panim el panim* face to face and proclaim- *Shema*, let us listen, let us begin to engage in dialogue. We are all created in the image of God. We all bleed the same blood and feel

the same pain and loss. We all have the same father and come from the same religious tradition- one that should bring us closer rather than divide us.

Unfortunately, our perspective, especially when it comes to the Middle East is clouded by the innocent blood that cries out from the land. We have become “those Arabs” and “those Jews”, brothers no more. Cain asks God, “Am I my brothers’ keeper?” The answer is still the same emphatic yes. Those who murder in the name of faith, desecrate God’s name, desecrate humanity. Hezbollah and Hamas and the Shiites and those Israeli hard liners and some members of the Christian right you desecrate God’s name. We are our brothers’ keeper- *anochi hashomeir achi* from the truest, deepest part of our soul. *Shema*- God has the same message for us all. We are meant to hear each other, to see each other as brothers and sisters, as mothers and fathers, as sons and daughters.

**A Second personal, way of looking at the Shema: Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. Hear O’ Israel, Adonai is our God, God Our Creator.**

One of the most holy truths in the Torah is this: we are all created in the image of God. Therefore each and every one of us has a spark of innate Divinity that can be accessed. When we say, *Shema Yisrael*, we are speaking to ourselves, about ourselves. Listen Israel- listen to your sacred soul.

We often forget to listen to the holiest core of ourselves. After all we live in a world filled with noise. There is always something to take our attention away from our deepest thoughts. Somehow the distractions make life easy. Who wants to ask themselves the big questions, “Am I satisfied with my life?” “How is my relationship with my spouse, with my children?” “Am I happy?” Who wants to hear the answers which inevitably mean intense personal work. Sometimes it’s just easier to surf the internet, to turn on the television, to blare music, rather than listen to our children, our spouses, or ourselves. But that is the opposite of what the *Shema* reminds us to do- listen. Listen morning, noon and night.

Even the Hebrew word Israel, teaches us who we are. At its basest understanding, Yisrael is Yisrael, the people who have survived oppression, time and again overcoming

the forces that would have destroyed us. Yisrael defines us as fighters, as tenacious tooth and nail strugglers.

Israel is also Jacob and a symbol of the wrestling that takes place in Genesis 32, Parashah Vayishlach. Jacob, as we know, is a twin (a breed unto themselves as I have learned over the past ten months) – Jacob is a Mama’s boy who likes to stay in the kitchen- imagine a younger Woody Allen sort, if you will. His mirror opposite, Esau, is a hunter, a man of the earth- Barry Bonds on steroids. Jacob, with his mother’s help, tricks Isaac, his father into giving him the blessing rather than the first born Esau. Imagine Esau’s rage- - imagine Jacob’s fear. Jacob runs and never looks back. Twenty years after the fact, when Jacob is successful, he prepares to be reunited with his brother again, not knowing who or what his brother has become. Jacob makes provisions, divides his family, sends ahead gifts to Esau and is left alone by the river Jabbok where he engages in a struggle for his life.

Jacob is roused to wrestle with an unnamed being. The two strive against each other until the break of dawn, and the “*ish*” tears Jacob’s hip at the socket. Jacob, refusing to let go, asks the being for a blessing. Says the unnamed man, “You shall no longer be called Jacob but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human and have prevailed.” Jacob returns to his family a new man- a stronger man, able to face his brother, able to lead his people. The rabbis, in several Midrashim, insist that the Divine Being was Jacob himself. Jacob wrestles with the parts of his past that have come back to haunt him. He wrestles with the decisions that he had made in his youth and the dishonest boy that he was. The Midrash allows us to understand the wrestling as an intellectual exercise, rather than a physical struggle. Jacob sat by the river- and listened to his soul. Shema, listening is life transforming.

The third way to understand Israel- is to break the word into two. Yishar- El- straight to God. When we hear who we are, and we respond to that small inner voice, we go straight towards God. We encounter the holy.

My mother’s friend Gail suggested that Chasing Daylight by Eugene O’Kelly was a profound sermon book. She was right. On May 24<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Eugene O’Kelly, stepped into his doctor’s office with a full calendar and a fuller life time of plans. Like most of us, he

saw the doctor's appointment as a frustration, one more thing to fit into an already crowded day. Gene O'Kelly was CEO and Chairman of KPMG LLP, the \$4 billion, 20,000 employee, century plus old partnership, one of America's big four accounting firms. O'Kelly's life was about taking meetings, always moving at 100 miles an hour, missing virtually every school function for his younger daughter, Gina, seeing his wife only at corporate outings, spending months on business trips. Gene was used to moving at breakneck speed. The spring of 2005 was no different. In one week, he flew to China, Texas, Denver, Washington, Montreal for business and then to California for a family wedding. While there Corrine noticed a slight droop on the right side of his face. No panic, they went on the internet and self diagnosed Bells palsy- viral, or maybe it was stress related. The following week, Gene was back in China for a summit and then Seattle for the annual Microsoft CEO meeting. Weeks after the initial droop in his face, Gene was finally going to the doctor. The night before the appointment Gene and Corrine went to a U2 concert. After four songs, Corrine bolted upright and yelled, "I feel that our world is about to be blown apart." He comforted her and they would have gone home but they had a meeting with Bono after the concert.

The doctor did give them news that blew their world apart; Gene was diagnosed with malignant glioblastoma- three connected multicentric brain tumors. Surgery was not an option. Chemotherapy was not an option. The only option was to begin to face his death. The doctors gave him three months at the months.

Because Gene was a CEO and a type A personality, he began to plan his death. He spent one week, just getting the financials in order, organizing his funeral, asking the speakers and retiring from his position. And then he began the process of what he called "unwinding relationships" with those closest to him. The unwinding took two steps, first, Gene made a list of those who taught him something in life, and then he reached out and met them face to face for several hours. After that final encounter, he would not see them again. Each encounter reminded him what was most important in life: relationships with others and with the self. As Gene states in "Chasing Darkness", he finally experienced perfect moments where he stopped running and focused on what was before him. He was not frustrated with the lack of time, because he had no time. And it

did not bother him. Gene learned that he liked to meditate; to listen to the sounds around him, the texture of his loved ones voices, the teachings of his own mind and failing body. Most of all Gene learned that his life was not about work- what had defined him in the past. His life was about relationship with others, with himself and with something greater- what he calls the deep love. Gene took a hard long look at the man he had been in business and realized that he was only living on the surface. With three months of life left, he lived authentically. He donated large amounts of money to charities, he volunteered time that he did not have to help others. He meditated and made time to listen to himself. He heard the part of his soul that was created in the Divine Image and responded to its call- for the first time Gene O'Kelly felt that he was Gene O'Kelly. Death should not be the impetus for slowing down our lives and listening. Unfortunately it is for many of us.

But living according to the Divine Image means that we hear and we do. That we listen to our unique Voice and live our own unique life. That we are the essential Renee, the essential Mark, the true Debbie.

Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. God, hear me. Grant me the ability to hear myself. Allow me to hear the cries of others, and to react. God remind humanity that we all worship You in some form whatever that name. Remind humanity that Your goal is that we heal rather than hurt each other. Shema Yisrael- hear Israel, Hear O'Israel- we are individuals working towards the goal of creating a world of peace and harmony.

Marge Piercy in her volume "Blessing the Day" explains it best.

Shema Hear, Israel, you are of God and God is one.

Praise the name that speaks us through all time.

So you shall love what is holy with all your courage, with all your passion  
with all your strength.

Let the words that have come down  
shine in our words and our actions.

We must teach our children to know and understand them.

We must speak about what is good  
and holy within our homes

when we are working, when we are at play,  
when we lie down and when we get up.  
Let the work of our hands speak of goodness.  
Let it run in our blood  
and glow from our doors and windows.

We should love ourselves, for we are of God.  
We should love our neighbors as ourselves.  
We should love the stranger, for we  
were once strangers in the land of Egypt  
and have been strangers in all the lands of the world since.  
Let love fill our hearts with its clear precious water.  
Heaven and earth observe how we cherish or spoil our world.  
Heaven and earth watch whether we choose life or choose death.  
We must choose life so our children's children may live.  
Be quiet and listen to the still small  
voice within that speaks in love.  
Open to that voice, hear it, heed it and work for life.  
Let us remember and strive to be good.  
Let us remember to find what is holy within and without.