ADVANCING JEWISH THOUGHT Mosaic

THE MYSTERIES OF THE SH'MA

https://mosaicmagazine.com/observation/religion-holidays/2020/02/the-mysteries-of-the-shma/

It's at once the most famous affirmation of Jewish belief—no other sentence in Judaism is more powerful—and the most misunderstood.

February 11, 2020 | Meir Soloveichik

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From when does one read the sh'ma in the evening?—Opening words, Mishnah and Talmud

"Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One."

Children covering their eyes during the Sh'ma on September 28, 2000 at Pressman Academy in Los Angeles. Bob Chamberlin/Los Angeles Times via Getty Images.

This simple sentence in the Hebrew Bible, known by its first word as the *sh'ma* ("hear"), is also the first subject addressed in the Talmud and the first biblical verse taught to Jewish children. It is, at once, the most famous affirmation of Jewish belief and the most misunderstood. To appreciate this paradox, we must begin with the text itself, two of whose three brief sections make up a key element in Moses' string of passionate valedictory charges to his people in the book of Deuteronomy. Here is the first section (6:4-9), in which the greatest of prophets sums up Jewish theology:

> Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thy heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.

From the words urging that this teaching be recited "when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" came the central inclusion of the *sh'ma* in, respectively, the evening and morning liturgy. And yet, in reciting it, Jews for millennia have added another sentence immediately after the first, and before proceeding to the rest. It is a sentence that appears neither in Deuteronomy nor anywhere else in the Bible and that, notably, is recited in a hushed tone, thereby signaling that it is both a part of and apart from the *sh'ma* prayer as a whole:

> Blessed be His glorious sovereign Name, for ever and ever.

Needless to say, the addition of this sentence—the exact date of its inclusion is unknown—did not evade the gimlet-eyed exegesis of the talmudic sages, who were struck by its oddity. Why is it there in the first place, and, if it is part of the liturgy, why not recite it aloud? In responding, the Talmud tells a tale, according to which the *sh'ma* originated not with Moses but long before him: with his ancestors, and specifically with one of the biblical patriarchs and his family.

The story goes like this: at the end of his days, Jacob, as described in Genesis, gathers all twelve of his sons around him. Feeling his life and his powers of prophecy slipping away, he expresses concern that one of his children might abandon the Abrahamic mission (something that had already occurred with a child of Abraham himself as well as with a child of Isaac). Seeking to reassure their father on this point, his sons address him by the covenantal name bestowed upon him by an angel (Genesis 32: 22-32). The rabbis explain:

> His sons said to him: "Hear, *Israel our father*, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." They were saying that just as there is only one God in your heart, so, too, there is only one in *our* hearts. At that moment Jacob our father, [reassured that all of his children were righteous], replied in praise: Blessed be His glorious sovereign Name for ever and ever. (P'saḥim 56a)

For the rabbis, Jacob's relieved exclamation linked the Almighty's eternity with his own. That is to say: God's name will be blessed forever because Jacob's family will serve Him forever. Now included in the *sh'ma* prayer, this same sentence links God's immortality with the posterity of every Jewish family. Because the words are not actually those of Moses, the rabbis stipulate that the sentence is to be voiced quietly.

This rabbinic story and its accompanying explanation have been embraced in Jewish law as the normative foundation for the *sh'ma* as it has been recited until today. Even Maimonides, who so often reads talmudic tales as other than literal, included the ruling in the Mishneh Torah, his code of Jewish law.

In short, in the recitation of the *sh'ma,* two different statements from two different moments in biblical history are being made simultaneously. In one and the same act, Jews quote the words of Moses speaking to the people of Israel and then the response to the twelve sons by their father Jacob, the *original* Israel. In the first, the *sh'ma* is a theological-political statement; in the second, it is an assurance of Jewish continuity. The first is philosophical, the second familial; the first is

public and ceremonial, the second private and emotional. Even as "Hear O Israel" is being sounded aloud, Jews quietly reaffirm their solidarity with the patriarch and his children.

That latter commitment is reenacted with particular force and poignancy in the longstanding practice of reciting the *sh'ma* before sleep at night. For Jewish parents putting their children to bed and saying it together with them, few rituals are more powerful. At that moment, we are uniquely aware that our children will not always be small and safe under our protection, and that one day we in turn will become dependent on them, and on the family they perpetuate, for our own immortality. As Rabbi Norman Lamm once put it, in saying the *sh'ma* aloud and then, quietly to ourselves, "blessed be His glorious sovereign name for ever and ever," we, just like Jacob, and together with our own progeny, play our part in ensuring that God's name will continue to be blessed here on earth.

And therein lies another lesson, this one about the nature of Judaism itself. For this purpose, we can compare the Talmud's tale about Jacob and his sons, about the recovery by a dying Jewish patriarch of his family's immortality, with the account of another famous deathbed scene in the ancient world.

In that account, related by Plato in the *Phaedo*, the Greek philosopher Socrates finds himself on the brink of death in an Athenian cell, attended by his students, pondering his legacy, and reviewing with them the great issues that had long absorbed his mind, not least the immortality of the soul. Serenely he assures these students that he welcomes his impending, self-inflicted death by hemlock as a release from the bonds of physicality that are the curse of earthly humanity. Freed from the constraints of the body and its passions, Socrates hopes for an afterlife happily occupied with the contemplation of eternal verities.

One could hardly imagine a starker contrast between two men. Socrates is wholly absorbed in his students and in his own immortal soul; he seems utterly uninterested in his family, calmly dismissing his wife and their baby son with nary a tear or emotional farewell. Jacob, the father who in creating and rearing faithful children has united his physical life with his spiritual legacy, commands those children to bear his lifeless body to the Holy Land. By rooting it in sacred soil, he will have prepared the way for the eventual return of his offspring to their national home.

As Eric Cohen has written, "for all its renown, the death of Socrates seems less fully human than the death of Jacob, which unites the private drama of father and sons with the public drama of Israel's beginnings as a nation." Just so; and in contrasting these two very different deaths, Cohen also points to one of the central differences between Greek and Jewish civilization.

In Aristotelian texts, the family merely provides preparation for service to the *polis*, and the great-souled man embodies the ideal of excellence. Plato goes farther, having Socrates declare in his *Republic* that in the truly just city, the philosopher-king will produce anonymous offspring whom he will pointedly not raise as his own lest he thereby compromise the universal compassion for all citizens that justice requires.

This, to a Jew, could not be more distant from God's explanation for his choice of Abraham: "For I have known him, that he will command his children and household after him, to keep the ways of the Lord, to perform righteousness and justice" (Genesis 18:19). For Jews, the domain of the family is where the blood bond and the spiritual bond are joined, where transmission takes place, where children are taught about the God of their fathers, where the realm of the truly sacred and the truly human conjoin.

The Greek world is not the Jewish world; even attempts to find similarities reveal more about the differences. Take, for example, the frequent likening of the Passover seder to the Greek symposium. Both meals involve a choreographed series of imbibings and a discussion of philosophical and theological subjects.

And yet: would a Greek symposium welcome children, much less focus on them? Is a single child to be found in Plato's *Symposium*? On the contrary, we find the best and the brightest of Greek society: Socrates is there; Alcibiades is there, physicians and philosophers, scholars and statesmen are there. No one has brought his progeny; to do so would ruin the conversation.

The ritual of the seder, for its part, though it may seem superficially Greco-Roman, is actually the inverse: it is all about children and family. In the Haggadah, philosophical inquiry is balanced by imaginative storytelling and covenantal re-creation. Father and mother teach children about the Almighty taking to Himself a people, and in going to sleep the children joyously respond: "Hear O -Israel-Father, the Lord our God, the Lord is one."

This, finally, returns us to the opening question of the Talmud—"from what time may one recite the *sh'ma* in the evening?"—and its seemingly technical answer: "from the time that the priests enter to eat their *t'rumah*."

The reference in the final word is to the end of twilight, when the priests of the Temple are once again permitted to partake of food they may eat only while ritually pure. But if that's when recitation of the *sh'ma* can *begin*, what is the *last* point at which it can still be recited? Here a debate emerges, with three opinions followed by a story:

> "Until the end of the first watch." These are the words of Rabbi Eliezer. The sages say: until midnight. Rabbi Gamliel says: until the dawn comes up. Once it happened that [Gamliel's] sons came home [late] from a wedding feast and they said to him: we have not yet recited the [evening] *sh'ma*. He said to them: if the dawn has not yet come up, you are still bound to recite. . . . Why, then, did the sages say until midnight? In order to keep a man far from transgression. (B'rakhot 2a).

The children of Gamliel, arriving after midnight but before dawn, and therefore assuming that, since the law accorded with the sages, they could no longer fulfill their obligation, are informed by their father that the sages established midnight only as an ideal deadline, in order to encourage early recital; but as long as dawn has not occurred, the commandment can still be obeyed.

Stop for a moment and consider who is telling this story. The author of the Mishnah is Rabbi Judah the Prince, a grandson of none other than Rabbi Gamliel. Judah's story therefore concerns his own father and uncles interacting with *their* father. This small succinct story thus shares a subject with the *sh'ma* itself: the subject, that is, of familial fidelity.

Where, Rabbi Judah is asking, is true wisdom to be found? Gamliel's sons have been to a drinking party: the term is often rendered as a wedding, but no textual evidence supports such a reading. More likely, in the Greco-Roman world in which the Mishnah was composed, it referred to a symposium, an event at which, by the lights of that culture, true sophistication and wisdom were to be found. Yet, for these aspiring young rabbis, the symposium has caused them to forget the central obligation of Jewish life. They arrive home thinking that the deadline has passed and contritely confess that they have failed.

At that point, new wisdom is transmitted from parent to child: it is not too late. In the darkness before dawn, this family can still give full-throated voice to the foundational words of Jacob's sons to their father Israel: Hear O Israel-Father, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.

That is why the practices and regulations surrounding this sentence, than which no other sentence is more powerful, are the very first matter taken up by the rabbis of the Talmud, and why it is the sentence occupying so central a place in every evening and morning prayer service, the sentence proclaimed in their dying breath by martyrs throughout history, the sentence repeated in gratitude and joy with children as they drift off to sleep, the sentence uttered as one prepares to bid farewell to this world, sanctifying the Lord's name for ever and ever.