

Vayehi 5770 Shema

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Shabbat Shalom! Happy 2010!

I hope you all had a nice winter break and it's nice to be back in shul this Shabbat.

I want to tell a story about our family's vacation, but first the back story. A couple of years ago, my father and I were discussing his 70th birthday and my parents' special anniversary and how to celebrate those. I told him that it is customary to take your kids and grandkids on a big vacation! And after a couple of years of negotiating, we went on cruise last week to celebrate.

So now the story: the cruise ship we went on had a water park on the top rear of the ship. Talya and I decided to climb to the up to the highest water slide. We stood at the top of a large staircase and looked at the beautiful water of the Caribbean. Down below I saw my mother, who does not have the best eyesight, and called out to her "Ema, Ema" so she could take our picture, which she did. A boy in front of us on the line who must have been about ten years old turns around and asks: "Are you Jewish? I said, "yes, we are; are you?" "Yes." After telling him our names, I asked him his. He said Noah and then, out of the blue, he asks: "do you know any prayers?" "Yeah, I know a few." Talya just smiled.

"Do you know the Shema?"

"Yes," I replied. So he started to sing: "*Shema Yisrael...*" right there, on the top of the boat on the highest point, overlooking the blue waters of the Bahamas, he was reciting the *Shema*. I joined in. With a big smile, I could not help but look at Noah and Talya, as a feeling of closeness, unity and togetherness came over us, even though I had never met this boy before.

This is a story about the connectedness of the Jewish people – even though we are a tiny percentage of the world's population, it seems that wherever you go, Jews are there. But for me, it's also about the power of this prayer; it's even recited on water slides! Now, to be clear, the *Shema* does not appear in our Torah reading this morning, though of course, we've already recited it twice today (*Shaharit* and taking the Torah out); but according to the rabbis, it is connected to this morning's *parashah*.

Let's explore the words: *Shema Yisrael* – "Listen or Hear – pay attention, Israel (the Jewish people), Adonai – *yod heh vav heh* - the Lord our God, Adonai is One/Oneness" -- is perhaps the most famous of all Jewish prayers.

The Shema is our pledge of allegiance to God; the Jewish declaration of faith. Traditionally, it is said upon waking up in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. It is considered the praise of the Almighty. Following what was passed down to me, it was the first prayer I taught my children, reciting it each night with them before they go to sleep. The Shema is also the words a Jew says prior on his or her deathbed.

While the text is found in Deuteronomy, the Talmud connects the Shema to our reading. Jacob asks his sons to gather around him, wanting to tell them secrets of the end of days and the Messiah. But the Shekhinah, the Divine Presence leaves him when he sees all the troubles, difficulties and traumas his offspring/future generations will endure. Suddenly, he is struck by the notion that his sons are not worthy or perhaps not interested in inheriting this precious legacy that Jacob wants to bequeath to them.

Perhaps they do not believe in the One God of the Universe, the God of his grandfather Abraham, the God of his father, Isaac, his God? So, he asks them: I am afraid that one of you harbors the intention to worship idols and leave our tradition; is this so? All twelve of them answer in unison: “Shema Yisrael – Listen Israel our father (this is a clever play on words since Jacob’s name is also Israel – so they are telling their father Israel to listen, to pay attention, to really hear and see the sincerity of their words – *Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad* – the Eternal One is our God, the Eternal alone. As your heart, Jacob, our father, is one and united in affirming the Holy One to be your God, so also are our hearts one and united in affirming God.”

At this Jacob breathes a sigh of relief and responds: “*Barukh Shem Kvod Malkhuto LeOlam Vaed* – Blessed be the name of glory of God’s majesty forever and ever!”

At this, Jacob can move forward with his prophecy, which, although it does not the whole mystery of the end of days and the messiah, his blessings do contain references to the events of the future.

The Shema of course, is found in the text of the Torah in Moses’ farewell address to the Jewish people in the book of Deuteronomy. It becomes the mantra of our people: we recite it as we remove the Torah on Shabbat and holidays. Of course, we all sing it together and the end of Yom Kippur when we hope we have reached up to more angelic realms.

Of course, the Shema is also found in the tefillin we bind on our arms and hear and on the mezuzot on our homes.

The Shema was also the prayer Jews recited before they were murdered during many moments in Jewish history from the Romans to the Spanish Inquisition to the Nazi gas chambers.

But the Shema is also found according to rabbinic tradition is last week's reading. As Jacob and Joseph reunite after a 22 year separation, the Torah states that father and son embrace and cry.

The Torah tells us, "*Vayeesor Yosef merkavto vayaal likrat Yisrael aviv goshnah vayerah alav vayipol al tzavarav vayevek al tzvarav od*. Joseph personally ordered his chariot and went up to greet his father in Goshen. When Joseph saw him, Joseph fell upon Jacob's neck and cried."

Rabbi Shmuel Herzfeld writes that Joseph's reaction is understandable. It is natural to embrace someone and weep after not seeing them for such a long period of time. But what was Jacob doing this whole time?

Rashi teaches that Jacob *hayah koreh keriat shema*, he was reciting Shema.

This is a strange comment: why would Jacob chose this exact moment to recite Shema? It seems quite odd.

To understand Rashi's explanation, we should appreciate the setting. Jacob knows his son has attained great power. Joseph has told his brother to tell their father about what has happened and how he is helping Egypt survive the famine. He asks them to tell Jacob: "So says your son Joseph: *Samani elokim leadon le-khol mitzrayim*. God has placed me as the Master over all of Egypt. Come down to me. Do not delay. And you will dwell in the land of Goshen. And you will be close to me--you and your sons and grandchildren and everything that belongs to you. And I will support you there, for this famine will last another five years and I am concerned that you and your household and everything that belongs to you will be impoverished."

But Joseph has overstated his political power. Of course, he really wasn't *the* master over all of Egypt, Pharaoh was. But he did have great power. He was able to save the country and provide the best for his family; Joseph had a new Egyptian name, his own chariot, special ring and coat from Pharaoh; and to top it all off a politically advantageous marriage with a prominent family.

We would expect Jacob to tell his son something like: "I'm really proud of you. Not only are alive and well, but you have saved the world from famine and you have saved our family."

But according to Rashi, Jacob does not say that at first, he recites the Shema.

Why? As Rabbi Herzfeld writes: Jacob is not merely filled with emotion and gratitude for seeing his long-lost and thought to be dead son, but he is also looking ahead at the future.

He knows that power can come and power can go. While Joseph has much, it is fleeting: the food, land and power can all be taken away (and we know how things will

turn out in Egypt for Joseph's descendants). It is also a guard against hubris – Joseph should not think it is because of himself that he is achieved all that he has. Our strength comes from ourselves, but also from others around us and from the Almighty, whose power fills the world.

The Shema is the prayer that reminds us of the key to our safety and strength in this world. In the Shema we declare: *Veshinantam levanekehah vedibarta bam*, you must teach the words of the Torah to your children and speak it to them.

To me, Jacob's reciting Shema, is his prayer of thankfulness and reminder to himself and Joseph of love and learning – love God and God's eternal ideas and pass those on to your children, to the future, share them with others. The Torah and its teachings are our strength.

Throughout Jewish history, we know that we have had many successes – even today, Jews are involved in positions of power in this country, but that is fleeting. There are many moments where the political winds have changed and power was taken from us. This last decade that has just concluded has been filled with many reminders of Jewish power and vulnerability – from 9-11, terrorism in Israel and around the globe, to almost having a Jewish Vice-President, to Jewish chief of staffs, to economic collapse and Bernie Madoff, from Israel's impressive achievements to its wars and serious challenges.

That's why Jacob says Shema. He understands that while political strength is important, the ultimate strength comes from knowing who we are; we are a group of people committed to serving God and God's Torah. This is why Jacob tells Joseph, *veshinantam levanekehah*—teach *this* message to your children.

The simple act of reciting Shema as we daven each morning, here in shul, when we celebrate our Torah, at a minyan or as we go to sleep, we remember our place in the world and we ask for God's love to be on us and on those around us and upon the future.

Whether you are reciting the Shema by yourself, with your child in their bed, or on top of waterslide with a fellow Jew you just met, God's power and Oneness of the Universe are accessible to all of us.

May we always be touched by the blessings of the Shema. Amen.