

Transitions and Partings: Sh'ma Yisrael

Ruth Aronson, Temple Emunah, July 24, 2010

Transitions are powerful times. At all stages of life, from the moment of birth to the last breath of life all of us experience a multitude of transitions in our lives.

Most transitions involve partings – separating from one's loved one, one's home, one's job and beginning anew. These moments are what I call "emotionally charged" moments. Memorable, significant, profound times. Times when we are most vulnerable and, arguably, most receptive to hearing and speaking truths.

"Sh'ma Yisrael. Adonai Eloheinu. Adonai Echad." These are powerful words that are central to Judaism. **"Hear O' Israel, the Lord is our God, The Lord Alone."** Surely they must be delivered in a way guaranteed to make an impact on the Children of Israel.

Although I grew up reciting the Sh'ma and understanding that it was a very important declaration, it was only when I began studying this Parasha that I paid attention to the context in which these words were first uttered. In my view, the context is not incidental, but rather, essential in order to ensure that the Children of Israel would actually hear Moshe's delivery of this critical message.

Moshe and the Children of Israel are at a moment of transition and parting. Moshe has learned that he will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land. He will be parting from the Children of Israel whom he has led on an extraordinary journey out of Egypt and through the desert. He is facing enormous loss, personal disappointment, and his mortality, yet, rather than despairing, Moshe must rise to the next challenge God asks of him – to prepare the Children of Israel for their entry into the Promised Land. This is an emotionally charged moment if there ever was one!

This powerful context compels Moshe to do his very best to deliver the core values that God wants the Children of Israel to adopt in the Promised Land. And once the Children of Israel comprehend that Moshe will not be accompanying them into the Promised Land and reflect on their own extraordinary journey and encounter with God, they are primed to pay attention to what Moshe has to say.

Perhaps that is why this Parasha begins with Moshe explicitly telling the people how he pleaded with the Lord to be permitted to "cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan," and relating that that "the Lord was wrathful with me on your account, and would not listen to me." Only after Moshe informs the people that God

has determined that Joshua will lead them into the new land does he begin to instruct the people in the laws and rules that they are to observe, so they may enter and occupy the land that God is giving them.

Then, as if to heighten their attention even more, Moshe contrasts his personal experience with that of the people, further defining the impending separation between them: "For I must die in this land; I shall not cross the Jordan. But **you** will cross and take possession of that good land." He then gets to the heart of the matter, warning the people that if they should act wickedly and make a sculptured image in any likeness whatever" they will cause God "displeasure and vexation." Moshe dramatically predicts dire consequences for such behavior, stating "I call heaven and earth this day to witness against you that you shall soon perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess; you shall no longer endure in it, but shall be utterly wiped out."

Moshe then assures the people that if one returns to God "with all your heart and soul" and obeys God, God will be "compassionate" and "will not fail you nor will he let you perish." "God will remember the covenant that he made with your fathers."

Moshe proceeds to retell the miracle of how God had led their ancestors out of Egypt and offers it as proof that the Lord alone is God. He then repeats the ten commandments that have been delivered at Sinai. He reminds the community that the whole congregation had stood at the mountain, listening to "the mighty voice out of the fire and the dense clouds" and in fear, had asked Moshe to "go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says," stating "Then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we will willingly do it."

Thus, we have all the ingredients necessary for the important message to be delivered. The speaker, Moshe, contemplating his separation from the Children of Israel as they depart for the Promised Land that he is forbidden from entering, and the listeners, the Children of Israel, reminded by Moshe that in their previous encounter with God at Sinai, they had been afraid to hear the voice of God directly, and had beseeched Moshe to be their intermediary.

It is at that emotionally charged moment when the Children of Israel would be most receptive to hearing a significant truth, that Moshe declares:

"Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloyhenu, Adonai Echad."

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

Imagine if the context of transition and parting was absent. Suppose that Moshe was accompanying the Children of Israel into the land. The important theological messages God wanted Moshe to deliver would have likely been subsumed in the many strategic and tactical decisions that Moshe would have needed to make on the journey and in the battles with the local peoples. Also, without the anticipated parting, Moshe might not have felt a sense of urgency to deliver God's message to the Children of Israel.

Transitions and partings are milestone in the journey of life that compel us to pause and articulate core values and truths. The more emotionally charged the moment, the more likely it will lead to some very significant communications and powerful "teaching moments."

Let's shift to a modern day example that most parents can relate to: sending a child off to college. By the time the Junior year of high school rolls around, parents begin to realize that their child is on a journey that will ultimately lead to their child separating from their home and embarking on a new and more independent stage of life. As parents approach the college selection process, the prospect of sending one's child off to a land where there will be multiple influences that one cannot control, creates an emotionally charged period in which parents seek to reinforce the values and choices that they hope their children will be guided by. And as the parent increasingly accepts this reality, often with the explicit help from the child, the parent enters the kind of emotionally charged transition that is conducive to taking stock and reviewing the core teachings and values that the parent hopes the child will take into the new land.

No wonder that the "college road trip" takes on such loaded significance. Parents and children visit college and university campuses to determine if the school is the "right fit" for them. Is it an urban, suburban or rural campus? Is the student body the right size? What is the faculty/student ratio? Does the curriculum offer the majors that the child is interested in pursuing? For Jewish parents who take seriously their responsibility to teach their children Jewish traditions, values and practices, these college road trips are also a chance to evaluate whether the college is the right fit Jewishly. What options for Jewish life exist on campus? How will my child find a comfortable way to connect Jewishly, to pursue Jewish studies, participate in Jewish communal life? As was illustrated with Moshe and the Children of Israel, the fact that ultimately it will be the child, without the parents, venturing into this new land, makes this an emotionally charged moment for the parents. Just as for Moshe, when the impending transition or parting offered the "teaching moment" to repeat and emphasize God's laws that had been transmitted at Sinai, the impending departure for college offers parents the opportunity to review with their children what they find compelling about Jewish traditions and beliefs. In the manner most appropriate for

their particular child, parents might help the child explore the opportunities that the child may wish to seek out in the new land that they alone will enter.

For me personally, the Sh'ma has always been a powerful and comforting declaration of my faith, one that I have derived strength from throughout my life. That the Torah prescribes that these words be spoken of when you lie down and when you rise up suggests that the daily practice of reciting the Sh'ma is helpful in framing our days so that all the hours in between are lived in a manner consistent with God's instructions. Only now that I have noticed how the context of transition and parting created the optimal time for Moshe to deliver the Sh'ma and other instructions to the Children of Israel do I realize that the recitation of the Sh'ma can also be a reminder for parents of children leaving for college to use the moment to communicate about core Jewish values.

Today I chose to focus on the particular transition and parting relevant to parents sending children off to college, but one could also explore the powerful opportunity that different kinds of transitions and partings offer. For example, the death of a loved one, the relocation of a family member to a distant land, the birth of a child and the change of leadership in a community. As we close, I would like to ask each of you to take a few moments to recall a time of transition or parting in your own life, and, pay attention to the emotional charge that your memory evokes. Then, at that moment of increased receptivity, let yourself listen to whatever personal teaching or core value may emerge for you as we recite the Sh'ma together.

(I'll pause for about a minute)

"Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloyhenu, Adonai Echad."

"Hear O' Israel, the Lord is our God, The Lord Alone."

Shabbat Shalom.