

What We Believe and How We Say It

I. The Shema.

2/23/51 Sp'field

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One of the great stories of Jewish History is that which tells that when the hordes of Crusaders reached a little town (Xanten) near the Rhine river on the evening of June 27, 1096, the Jews of that place were partaking of their Sabbath ~~meal~~ evening meal together. The arrival of the crusaders meant, of course, certain death for them as for all Jews who were swept up in their bloody path. So the meal was discontinued. But they did not leave the hall until the saintly R. Moses Ha-Cohen had first said Grace, enlarging the ~~prayers~~ regular text with prayers appropriate to the awful moment. And then, unlike custom, the grace was concluded with the words: Shema Yisroel etc. Thereupon they all went to the synagggue meeting both death and martyrdom.

This is but one of legions of incidents where the true and brave of our people in the ~~moment~~ moment of death girded themselves with dignity and strength by simply concentrating mind and soul on the Shema and its enormous statement of the nature and meaning of God.

But it is not alone in time of martyrdom and death or in the unusual circumstance that the Shema has been significant in Jewish life.

Since our earliest days it has been the core of our being, the essence of our faith. In its words our people have been able to find the summation of every acceptable philosophy and the enlargements of other doctrines and ideas our teachers found first in the Shema. Aside from intellectual acceptance, the Shema is ^{emotionally} loved. It is the first of prayers taught to be lisped by the little child and it literally accompanies the Jew from the cradle to the grave.

But the familiar oft-times becomes less precious and so commonplace ~~in the~~ are the accents of the Shema to us that ~~perhaps~~ perhaps the full depth and brilliance of its meaning may become vague.

And we should ask ourselves : Why is it that out of the entire Biblical literature this one little verse and its following paragraphs has become not alone the watchword of Judaism but, in the opinion of most religious thinkers and students of religions of the world, one of the most powerful intellectual ideas in civilization

The origins of the Shema go far back in the history of our people when wandering in the desert they first dimly perceived the unity of life and purpose governing all things. . Thus was born an idea which was one day to be the ~~firm~~ cornerstone of Judaism. But the seers and prophets affirmed the truth of the Shema, it was

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. the rabbis who brought the Shema into the focus of popular attention because, I think, they recognized the threefold source of its meaning.

I The Rabbis recognized the source of strength in the Shema that lies in its philosophical ~~implications~~ ^{meaning}. Stressing the unity of God, a unique and universal concept was, in its day, unlike any other expression of faith. We take the idea for granted. But in the ancient world and perhaps even today the concept is revolutionary. It is not merely a matter of rejection of many gods, of paganism, of the deification of persons. More important the Shema rejects the spiritual power of any person or thing or natural force. Originally ~~it was~~ the framers of the Shema opposed the greatest kingdoms on earth: the star cults of Babylonia, the animal worship of Egypt, the nature worship of Greece, the emperor worship of Rome as well as stone, tree and serpent religions = idolatries of other heathen religions. ^{Every day we combat our idolatry & pagan habits.} It requires a special kind of spiritual sensitivity to understand that as complex as life ^{appears} ~~seems~~ to our senses, there is but one power in the world which the invisible unifies everything. Effect of that kind of faith on man is enormous: it liberates man from slavery to nature and dependence upon material things alone.

II Secondly, the rabbis recognized the Shema as a source of strength because they understood that such a view of ~~life and~~ God and the world has a spiritual meaning and infuses life with *not only unity but* an enduring value.

It is too easy to say merely that our faith is monotheism-- a belief in one God. Judaism is more than that: it is an ethical monotheism, both God and man bound by moral and ethical principles. The prophet ~~defined~~ *described* a kind of worship emancipated from all organized religion, and all forms of ritual when he said in the spirit of the shema: "The Lord of Hosts is exalted thru justice ~~righteousness~~ and the Holy God is sanctified thru righteousness."

The ethical imperative of a God bound Himself by all laws of ethics, imposes upon us a faith that insists that every act of good or of evil has its eternal consequences. Yes there are conflicts in life; yet in the Jewish view the universe is ^{ethically} ONE marvelously harmonized and it lies within the power of man to overcome ~~vixx~~ evil and to make the victory of goodness sure and certain. God has no eternal opponent. There is not ~~Satan~~ Satan to embody the evil of this world. But adonoi Echod, God is one.

III And finally, then, the rabbis reasoned that strength lay within the Shema and its view because they ~~purposes of life as~~ saw the Shema as the representation of a relationship

between God and man in partnership ~~both~~
pursuing attainable goals.

They said that whenever a man recites the Shema what he is really saying is that he accepts the yoke of the kingdom of heaven."

In our terms this means that to confess God's unity means nothing if we do not confess also our own. To declare faith in God means nothing if we do not also recognize our job: our purpose to build a kingdom, a ~~society~~ ^{society} unified as God is one. To labor for a unity of man, a unity of human history and a unity of purpose.

Last week, ironically, at the Passover season, celebrating the freedom of our people from the bondage of Egypt, I found myself for the first time thinking about and giving thanks for Freedom in the south of our country, ^{where freedom for many is questionable} But I could only think and be grateful and pray for myself.

And our kind, The newspaper reported the retort of a church officer who ^{on Easter} turned away negro worshippers with the statement: White men built this church and white men will worship here. Who built that church I do not really know. That is whose hands built it. But I know that ~~God~~ ultimately God built that church and this synagouge and this world and our humanity. This world is one, this people is one.

These are some of the reason, I think, the rabbi raised the Shema to be the confession of our essential faith, to be repeated by every Jew twice daily, on Sabbaths and festivals, at the

culmination of the Day of ~~A~~tonement, and in the last hour of life to assert the essential principle of existence: an absolute unity of God ^{eternal unity} of mankind and of ~~all~~ ^{a unity} ~~ex~~ thought and purpose.

Who can but find himself stronger in the face of darkness ~~than~~ if our Shema be on the heart and mind.

The Zohar alternately mystical and rational says: "When men in prayer declare the Unity of the Holy Name in love and reverence, the walls of earth's darkness are ~~split~~ cleft in twain and the face of the Heavenly King is revealed lighting up the universe. " So may it be as we pray together. Amen.