

## Grosse Pointe Jewish Council – August 20, 2016

I think that my earliest memory of Religious School was learning the *Sh'ma* for my Consecration Service. I remember that I mastered it at about the same time that I learned to recite the Pledge of Allegiance in Kindergarten. Both the *Sh'ma* and the Pledge were affirmations whose value came from the saying, rather than the knowing. Not understanding what either meant I only knew that was important for me to say them and to be part of the group saying them.

The Torah portion of *V'etchanan* in Deuteronomy contains both the Ten Commandments and *Sh'ma/V'ahavtah*. We roll the *Sh'ma* paragraph from *V'etchanan* into the *m'zuzzot* on our doorposts, and into the leather boxes of *t'fillin*. We mark our homes with it and bind it to our bodies when we pray. I knew, even as a child, that it was supposed to be important to me because of the solemn reverence with which everyone regarded it. We were told it was “The Watchword of our Faith.” I first thought that “watchword” meant that it was a secret code, a password by which one Jew recognized another. Later, I wondered if this “watchword” could be the key that unlocked the door to “faith,” that reciting it might mystically open to me the mysterious realm of God.

From childhood on we carry the *Sh'ma* like a verbal membership card-- a reminder that whenever we pull it out from its pocket-place, that we belong to a larger and very special group. And because it was so early incorporated and integrated into the very soul of our Jewish being we tend to take it for granted—knowing it for what it is, rather than for what it says or for what it means.

There is a story told about a student who learned the *Sh'ma* from hearing it (as we all did) but never quite got the Hebrew words right. *Sh'ma Yisrael* came out “Sh'ma is for real”, *Adonai Elohaynu* came out “I don't know Elohaynu”, *Adonai Echad* came out “I don't know Echad.” For all its childlike charm, there is a lot of truth in that misquote.

Something indeed tells us that the *Sh'ma* is “for real”, that those words we so easily repeat are intrinsically important to our Jewish selves. It's “for real” because of its effect on us personally and communally; because it has been our statement of faith for 3000 years; because it links each generation to the one which precedes it and to the one which come after it; and because it is the single most significant Jewish connector that ties parent to child.

The *Sh'ma* is for real. That is obviously and experientially true. But knowing God is another matter altogether. The child said “I don't know Elohaynu (‘our God’), I don't know Echad (‘oneness’)” and I can fully understand and appreciate that statement. The truth is that we can never “know” God, we can never touch the infinite with our finite minds. We can never know what it means to say that God is “one”, a unique singleness that defies the reality of our complex and multifaceted world. The truth is that the student's mispronunciation is right on target: the *Sh'ma*, is indeed for real, it has a tangible reality in our world and a measurable effect on my Jewish existence. But *Elohaynu*? I can never truly, really, know “our God”, nor can I ever fully comprehend what it means to say God is *echad*, is “one”.

The *Sh'ma* is a statement of the challenge that is the essence of the Jewish quest. Ours is a constant struggle to touch the Infinite from within the finite confines of our hearts and minds and lives. We remind ourselves of that quest with words from our previous Reform *siddur*, Gates of Prayer:

“Days pass and the years vanish, and we walk sightless among miracles. [God], fill our eyes with seeing, and our minds with knowing; let there be moments when Your Presence, like lightening, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness, and exclaim in wonder: How filled with awe is this place, and we did not know it!”

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