



The Shema October 4, 2014 / 10 Tishrei 5774

G'mar Tov!

As you may remember, we announced a change in direction for the Unraveller a number of years ago, from being a commentary on the weekly haftarah to being a weekly source for information on Judaism. We're going to explore some of the sources or reasons behind the rituals we perform every day. We have a number of scholars lined up to write for us and will be accepting your submissions for selection.

What better way to start 5775 than with . . .

The Shema

When I was in High School I became furious when I read the second paragraph of the Shema. How could I accept a God who promised rain and food if I followed his ways!

I will favor your land with rain in the proper season, rain in autumn rain in spring and you will have ample harvest.

And if I chose not to believe; would I starve and cause innocent people to suffer?

When I entered JTS one of my teachers explained the “you” in the second paragraph referred to the people of Israel. That didn't make me feel any better. I was still troubled with a text that began speaking to “you” in the singular and then suddenly changed to “you” plural. I was somewhat comforted to learn the Reconstructionists and the Reform had eliminated this paragraph from their prayer books. Unfortunately I didn't belong in either of those camps.

Last year I tried again. By this time I knew the Shema in its entirety existed in its present form by the first century. Since Deuteronomy was written before the other books, the order of the paragraphs was in a correct historical order:

Dt. 6:4-9

Dt. 11:13-21

Numbers 15: 37-41

When I examined the three paragraphs and their relationship to one another; I realized the second paragraph was positioned between loving and teaching and tzitzit and mezuzot and I

wondered what could have been the organizer's purpose in placing the second paragraph, which is concerned with the land and peoples relationship, between the commands to love God, teach that love to your children, and the remembering we were taken out of Egypt and the signs of mezuzot and tzitzit?

And then I realized that while the text is attributed to Moses, we know differently. Deuteronomy was allegedly written 600 years after his death. We know that prior to the Josianic Reform 621 BCE that Josiah's grandfather or maybe his great grandfather attempted to change his nation in much the same way that Josiah did. We are told in 2 Chronicles 29 and in the second book of Kings that Hezekiah (727-701) did what was right in the name of the Lord. He repaired the doors of the Temple, he gathered the priests and Levites and had them clean out and repair the temple. Made Passover, invited Ephraim and Manasseh from Dan to Beersheva. Hezekiah also built a tunnel in Jerusalem, stopped the waters outside, fortified the walls and mounted a defense against Sennacharib.

Josiah's Reform coincided with the weakening of Assyria. It also revolutionized Jewish faith. Josiah replaced the system of governance by elders with a caste of priests. He abolished worship at local shrines and insisted that sacrifice could only take place in one Temple, the Temple.

Imagine how the local people must have felt when their local form of worship was abolished. For generations they had been praying and sacrificing at local shrines and high places and suddenly that right was taken away. Imagine the feelings of emptiness of loneliness they must have experienced. What should they do? How should they worship? It was around this time that daily prayer began to emerge and, according to some, the reading of the Torah when people pledged for the first time in history to observe the law as written in a book.

The second paragraph of the Shema speaks to the people who could not afford to go and sacrifice in Jerusalem. That's why the "you" is plural. God says, "people worship me, remember what I did for you in Egypt, and if perhaps you still need to offer sacrifice in some local place, do it in my name not the names of your local dieties. Remember what "I gave you." The second paragraph of the shema acknowledges that everyone cannot worship in the same manner. But if they follow God's ways to the best of their ability, they will become a blessing.

This week's Haftarah commentary is reprinted from one originally written for the Unraveller for September 18, 2010 by Rabbi Charles Simon, Executive Director of the FJMC and author of "Understanding the Haftarah. An Everyperson's Guide" and "The Non-Jewish Spouse: Strategies for Clergy and Lay Leadership".