

NOW HEAR THIS (PEOPLE OF THE BOOK)

Isaiah 28:23

Give ear, and hear my voice; listen, and hear my speech.

We have heard today like our ancestors 3 millennia ago
those immortal and revolutionary words

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad

Hear O Israel the Lord is our God the Lord is One.

These six Hebrew words transformed the world
and they can transform and renew us today, and every day.

Generally considered the cornerstone of our Judaic liturgy, endless commentaries have been written about the *Shema*, mostly focusing on the multiple meanings of *Adonai Echad, The Lord is One*. On this weighty subject, I will only briefly say that One ironically is so many things: One is Prime and Indivisible, One is The First, One Is Tops, One is Marriage, One is Unique, One is Unity and Community, One is the one precious moment in Time which is all we ever have and One is Eternity, One is Power and One is Peace, One is Wholeness, and One is Unfathomable... and for my fellow lovers of popular music, we might smile at the theological implications that One is the Loneliest Number that you'll ever know...

These quick ruminations on Divine Oneness aside, I wish to focus on a part of our essential 6-word equation which is hardly ever considered. We commonly, almost unthinkingly, refer to this key utterance by its beginning word -- the *Shema*, yet Plaut and Hirsch and many commentaries fail to say anything about the significance of the word *Shema* itself: yet we must take notice that we are enjoined to Hear that the Lord our God is One, not know, understand, remember, believe, read, write, etcetera but Hear this ultimate Truth, a truth best conveyed by the power of oral (aural) Transmission.

Moses' use of *Shema / Hear* in this critical instance, is therefore not a mere rhetorical preface. *Shema Yisrael* is a wake-up call, a signal of highest importance: Now Hear This, This Deserves Your Special Attention, Not Only is the Lord our God, get this!, God is also One...

It is this quality of dedicated attention as it relates to the process of hearing, really hearing, that I would like to explore. If we compare hearing to our other senses, we may say that it is in one way our most passive sense and in another, the most active. Hearing is passive in that it is easier and usually more effective to shut one's eyes against seeing, one's nose against smelling, one's mouth against tasting and simply choose not to touch to prevent touching. The other senses normally allow us to choose or direct the focal area of what input we wish to receive, whereas hands over ears or even earplugs may do little to shut out your neighbor's boisterous Saturday night party. This passivity goes hand in hand with receptivity, a quality which lends itself to learning and is an important prerequisite to spiritual seeking. Yet simultaneously, hearing demands active intention, for sounds can easily become subliminal and therefore unobserved. As Isaiah, today's hafatarah author says (48:8)

*Gam lo shamata gam lo yadata gam meaz lo pitchah aznecha,
You did not hear, you did not know... you did not open your ear...*

Thus, we must *consciously* develop our ability to really hear the divine symphony of sound which surrounds us. In keeping with this understanding, the *Shema* points not only to our theological goal, namely, *Yichud*, or oneness with the One God. It also shows us the method for doing so.

When we do achieve the intensity of hearing whereby we are truly listening, we capture the distinct and unique essence of things, which also fosters our appreciation of them. At the same time, we can hear the flowing interconnectedness between these things, their collective harmony.

Just sit and listen in a garden or by a river one morning:

you will hear birdsong, the wind, your breath, perhaps water rippling, a cat purring, a car honking, wings flapping, the background silence, etc. So rich in their particular distinctness, and simultaneously, so rich as a greater audio- tapestry. The hearing process, in other words, encapsulates both the Uniqueness and the Unity within the One.

Furthermore, hearing connects us to both our most primal and our most noble levels. When we Hear a loved one's heartbeat, or a drum, or a baby's cry, we are hearing the wordless rhythm and very pulse of Life; this engenders a powerful oneness with the unrepeatably moment. In a very different kind of activity, we can listen to a Bach fugue or a Hamlet soliloquy or a congregation singing *cal ha-n'shamah* and hear the noblest that humankind is capable of, for when we hear music and words we reach the apex of the abstract and approach the eternal. Thankfully, Life's wondrous complexity mixes the simple sounds of the everyday with the grandiose and the cosmic, revealing how Oneness embraces high and low in a single spectrum. As Thoreau said,

The squeaking of the pump sounds as necessary as the music of the spheres. How poetic then that in this balancing act between the primal and the noble, as well as in our physical balance, we can thank our inner ear...

Our history too resonates with sounds and music and holy pronouncement immortalized in many key stories:
the shofar blasts of Joshua and the Jubilee,
David's soothing harp,
Miriam's triumphant song,
the strategic shibboleth,
the still small voice heard by Elijah,
the speaking of the burning bush,
the thunder on Sinai accompanying the saying of the ten commandments,
Rabbi Akiva reciting *Shema* while being martyred by the Romans
and indeed the Creator's cosmic utterances which created the world...
Hear O Israel...

But there is more than metaphysical and historical significance in this act of Hearing. There are also deep and abiding lessons for the way we may practice our belief. *Shema* is in the imperative tense, along with many of the key verbs that follow in the *parsha*, and thus is a call to action and realization, as part of a complete and ongoing process. Now, not only has later rabbinic wisdom established our frequent recital of the *Shema* -- twice each day, and several times in the regular and the holiday liturgies. The directive to contemplate God's oneness is even more expansive in the sublime verses (6:6 & 7) which follow soon after:

*And these words, which I command you this day, shall be in your heart;
And you shall teach them and talk of them when you sit in your house,
and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you
rise up.*

So, in reality, the Torah enjoins us to practice continuous awareness of the One God, hearing that divine voice everywhere, in every moment & in all of our endeavors. *Hear O Israel the Lord Our God the Lord is One* is thus not only the historic proclamation by a revolutionary prophet to a small nation three millennia ago; neither is *Shema* meant to be a once-a-year affair at High Holydays or once a week on Shabbat or even once or twice a day. Rather it is an omnipresent injunction, everywhere and always.

Furthermore, in the equally inspired verse which immediately follows *Shema Yisrael* we hear

Vahavta et Adonai Eloheicha

b'cal l'vavcha oov'cal nafshecha oov'cal m'odecha

Love God with all your might, soul and heart...

So we are made to understand that along with constancy of purpose in time, our practice is deepened by the commitment, *kavanah* and indeed by the love we put into it. And love of course is essentially a Dialogue, a dialogue in which we open ourselves to hear God's still small voice within us and allow the Divine to listen back. Then, as a consequence of loving God and being loved, two wonderful things can happen. First, because we believe we are cared for, we can accept fate's up and down vicissitudes with greater equanimity. Secondly, inasmuch as we share the bond of being tiny reflections of the Divine Oneness, we can practice that other great commandment which *Love the Lord your God* implies: namely, we can begin to truly *Love our Neighbor as Ourselves*. This Love means we put our own egos and agendas aside, and instead of the all-too-common bickering and strife we see about us, we practice the solution the world is too often literally dying for: we simply really listen to each other, fully hearing each other out, with humility, patience and compassion. I speak, and I hope you will hear me, not only of Islam and the West, Palestine and Israel, Orthodox and Reform, but of our own community... and of our families and selves as well. Let us use then this gift of Hearing, for honest Hearing leads to Love... and vice-versa.

Now continuing onwards in the parsha, several other imperatives follow *Shema / Hear* and *Ahavta / Love*. Moses directs us also to teach, discuss, fear, and, even more significantly, *Shamor / Keep (the commandments)* and *Asita / Do (what is right & good)*.

So with

Shema / Hear,

Ahavta / Love,

Shamor / Keep and

Asita / Do

we have a complete prescribed spiritual program --

Hearing, we understand...

Loving, we take this understanding to heart.

Keeping on,

we continuously practice and deepen this heart-felt understanding...

And then Doing,

we put all this into action, not only as a deepening of our own growth process, but also as inter-action with the wider world as well.

And finally, let us not forget that *Shema* and these other key verbs are all in the singular: this commandment to hear and to love and practice is a challenge which must be taken up by every individual, and by every community in every generation. Israel, as archetypal seeker and Israel as the Union of seekers, must continually rediscover its unifying root, hearing the Truth anew.

In conclusion, hearing can provide us with unparalleled spiritual vehicles. For our community, for instance, imagine how less valuable our services would be if we only read the siddur silently together, not hearing each other's words or singing! And, for ourselves, as I've suggested earlier, there is no better way to open the door to the invaluable practice of Meditation than to sit and just listen quietly. One can either simply hear what there is to hear, or focus on an audible chant, or a short silent prayer, or one's breath or the wind or the subtle *Ruach* of the Universe or ultimately the great Stillness at its core. Doing this, in keeping with all the major mystic traditions, one becomes attuned, a divine instrument, hearing and becoming music simultaneously, attuned, atoned, at one.

I end with a quote, once again from Isaiah, who according to my concordance, uses the word '*Hear*' 49 times in his poetic prophecy.

(Isaiah 30:21)

And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying,
This is the way, walk in it.

Now let us take a few minutes, being silent, and hear what there is to hear.
Shema!