# VAETCHANAN: The Jewish Pledge Of Allegiance

This week's Parasha, Va'etchanan, contains two cardinal texts of the Jewish faith: the Ten Commandments and the first part of the Shema Israel. Today, we will briefly analyze the Shema's first verse. (To learn more about the Ten Commandments, consult the link below.)

To begin with, let us remember that the Shema Israel is not formally a prayer. It is not a text in which we praise God or ask for His help. The Shema we recite daily contains our declaration of faith in God's existence and unGod, educates us to love God, urges us to fulfill His commandments, and exhorts us to behave with morality and decency.

**HOW DO YOU SAY "GOD EXISTS" IN HEBREW?**

The first verse of the Shema Israel contains the three ideas that constitute the principles of our faith:

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**"Hear, O Israel, HaShem is our God, HaShem is one."**

- That God exists.
- That we are the only witnesses of His revelation.
- That God is one.

Ironically, the most significant word in this theme is not explicitly written in the verse (biblical verse). Our verse literally says, "Hear, O Israel, HaShem our God, HaShem one." But the correct translation is: "Hear, O Israel, HaShem IS our God, HaShem IS one." Why are these two verbs not explicitly included in this verse? Because in biblical Hebrew, verbs are not conjugated in the present tense like in other languages. To indicate the present, Hebrew uses only the pronoun and the noun. When I say, for example, ANI QORE, which is generally

translated as “I read,” I am actually saying, “At this moment, ‘I am’ a reader.” That is why when one wants to say the verb “to be” in the present, “is,” or “am,” nothing is said! If I want to say, “This chair IS white,” I will say, “hakisé laban” = “The chair… white.” And when I want to say “HaShem IS our God,” I will say “HaShem… our God.”

Ironically, the idea of “BEING” that is hidden between the word “HaShem” and the word “our” conveys the main message of the entire Shema Israel: the affirmation that God “IS,” that is, that God “EXISTS,” which constitutes the number one principle of the Jewish faith.

**HOW DO WE KNOW THAT GOD EXISTS?**

The answer to this question is presented in the second part of this verse: “HaShem is ‘our God‘.” Here, the emphasis is not on the word “is“ but on the word “our.”

In Judaism, belief in God is based, first and foremost, on the fact that Jews are the only witnesses of Divine Revelation (□□□ □□□). At Mount Sinai, when God chose us among all the nations and gave us His Torah, He revealed Himself to our ancestors, transmitting the first two commandments. The Divine revelation did not manifest through images. In fact, the Tora seriously warns us against creating imaginary visual images of Divine revelation, as other religions do. God’s revelation (in Hebrew: ma’amad har Sinai) is described thus: “and all the people saw the voices [that came from God].“ The Torah uses exceptional language, “seeing the voices,“ to indicate an extrasensory, supernatural event, a kind of prophetic telepathy. This “shocking“ (even “traumatic”) event was imprinted in our genetic memory, and we thus became the only human group to have directly and collectively experienced Divine Revelation. Rabbi Yehuda haLevi mentioned about 1,000 years ago that other religions have not even falsely claimed to have experienced a collective revelation, a myth impossible to sustain. Gentile religions claim, instead, supposed

“private“ revelations to individuals like Yeshu, Muhammad, or Joseph Smith.

Now we can better understand the second message of the Shema Israel: “HaShem is OUR God.“ God revealed Himself to us, the entire people of Israel, and this experience of divine revelation has transformed us to this day into the privileged witnesses of His existence.

Of course, we must develop this genetic faith by seeking a more personal knowledge of God, which is increased through studying His Torah and observing and admiring His creation. Both “books“—the Torah and Creation—reveal a Wisdom that is not human and thus direct our minds and hearts towards a deeper recognition of the Author/Creator of both works.

**WHAT DOES IT MEAN THAT GOD IS ONE?**

Jewish monotheism, the belief that there is only one God and that there is no other power independent of Him, is probably the most revolutionary idea of the Torah. Why? Because monotheism was a totally counter-intuitive idea. Let us see. For ancient man, it was impossible to think that there was only one God. Human beings naturally perceive reality in terms of conflicting and opposing events: life and death, war and peace, joy and pain, etc. For the pagan mind, it was impossible to conceive that the complex spectrum of this reality comes from just one God! The most normal, intuitive, and logical conclusion is that the world is governed by multiple gods, each in charge of a particular power: this is the god of good and the god of evil, the god of light and the god of darkness. And those gods are in permanent conflict and fight against each other to overcome one another. From a psychological perspective, polytheism is also the most natural way of projecting the most violent aspects of human reality: the gods possess the same conflicts, interests, and appetites as the human beings who fight each other to impose themselves on one another.

Conceiving ONE GOD from whom all the contradictory and opposing aspects of our complex human reality derive is revolutionary and almost “insane.”

It may be difficult for us to perceive today the magnitude and incredible impact of monotheism on humanity simply because most of the civilized world has rejected polytheism and adopted the principle established in Shema Israel.

To summarize: The first verse of the Shema Israel is not a prayer that we recite to God. It is a biblical text directed towards us (Hear, O Israel). It reminds us of the three most essential principles of Judaism and exhorts us to remember them every day, reciting them as a proclamation of loyalty to our God.

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