

THE SHEMA

By Michael Picardie

The Shema's opening line "*Shema Yisrael Adonai Elohenu Adonai Echad*" means "Hear O Israel, YHVH..." [yod, hey, vav, hey – the unspeakable name HaShem or the LORD or the Eternal One spoken as Adonai] ...is our God, YHVH [the LORD or Adonai] is One."

The rest of the prayer consist of quotations from Deuteronomy [6:4, 6:4-9, 11: 13-21], and Numbers [15: 37-41] alluding to the good that will come to us if we obey God's commandments. The opening line expresses the essence of monotheistic Judaism: the Shema is in contrast to pagan Romano-Hellenism's polytheism, pantheism and Christianity.

The latter stresses the Trinity which affirms the three-in-one idea: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. According to Louis Jacobs (*The Jewish Religion: A Companion* 1995: 462] in Christian theologies, the three names of the Christian God can be interpreted as YHVH, Elohim, and Adonai. To the Christian YHVH can be pronounced and refers to God the Father – Jehovah, which is how YHVH is (wrongly) pronounced. Jesus is (presumably or can be interpreted by the Christian as) the LORD (Adonai). Elohim is literally "gods" – unified by Jews into one God Who can be interpreted as the ever present El of time and space – only in post-biblical times possibly the Holy Spirit which we call the *Shekhina*. This idea is used in Kabbalah to indicate God immanent in *Malkut*, the world, or in being-on-the-earth or being-ready-to-hand, or infusing the human being who is *B'Tselem* – in the image of God.

Ayn Sof or *Kether* is God transcendent and sovereign (omniscient and omnipotent – Ethical Being) in Him/Herself and for Himself/Herself and reflective in relation to Adam Kadmon, that is the human being trying to be the image of God.

The response to the opening line of the Shema is, "*Baruch shem k'vod malchuto l'olam va'ed*" - "Blessed be the glorious majesty of God for ever". Commentators suggest, this was because the line, expressed in hushed repetition of the meaning of the first line was a whispered response to the deification of the Roman emperor in rabbinic times. It had to be hushed with the eyes covered not only because of the shining glory of God, but because, potentially, as the Maccabean wars suggest, the second line "Blessed be the glorious majesty of God for ever" was a subversive political statement – *against* the deification of the emperor, against Hellenic-Roman or Greek-Syrian pantheism/polytheism [Jacobs 1995:462].

The opening line could be interpreted as non-heretical in Christian terms because the Trinity expresses the idea of the Three-in-ONE. Even Plato referred to God and his Zeus would have conformed to a Platonic Idea of One-ness, the Ideal Form of perfection, not Zeus the rapist in a shower of gold who possesses Danae not the raping swan who possesses Leda. Hence the ancient idea is that Plato is a kind of Moses speaking Greek.

But to repeat the Shema in the second line of the Shema is to assert that there is no other aspect of the one-and-only God but his glorious majesty embodied in his/her name THE NAME – HASHEM which is His/her glorious Oneness *l'olam v'ed* for ever and ever. His/her oneness is, then, his/her

main and eternal quality. But he is also the very Name, the uttermost power and rationality in language, his name which given utterance brings about creative Being, as well as Being-Transcendent and therefore also immanent Being.

The first line suggests at first the immanence of the Name *in Israel* which is each Jewish person: naming, then, also means *discourse*: why are we named the way we are in the community of Israel? So His/Her name is HaShem – THE name which in naming is creative.

Why was I named in Hebrew as Mordechai when I was circumcised? So that I would help save Jews from spiritual or actual murder at the mercy of the equivalent of Haman in the Purim story? We all do help Mordechai's mission when we attend a service or perform a Jewish ritual or do a *mitzvah*. In English I was named as Mi-cha-el. Who is like unto El, Elohim, the gods-as-God, united in oneness bringing together the El of spaces and times into the One.

According to Sartre and Heidegger, and Indian mathematical philosophy, the numeral one involves the idea of negation, nought, nihilation, Nothingness which is a prelude to the creation of and by One. Sometimes the infant without self-consciousness - only omnipotence - is really Nothing-As-Being-Submerged-Into-The-Parental-Attachment-Figure. Identity as an individual emerges slowly out of sensory-motor and concrete operations and relating to the significant Others in the real world. Some societies submerge individual identity into the collective – as in hunter-gatherer society like the traditional San of Southern Africa. Tribal African and privatised middle-class and working-class identities now coexist.

If physically possible, the Shema *should be said whilst dying*, when we leave behind our collective and individual identity and enter the realm of nihilation, zero, since our memory amongst the living may be as one who was one for whom the living will say the Kaddish, the hallowing of God's Name. All the more so when faced with the actual fact of martyrdom, "sanctification of the name", the *Kiddush HaShem* of heroes like Rabbi Akiva who would have said the Shema with his last breath. In Rabbi Akiva's case too this was a quasi-political statement: refusing to acknowledge the secular power as sovereign even whilst being tortured to death.

The rest of the Shema reiterates other aspects of Jewish theology. Apparently the recitation of the ten commandments during rabbinical times, presumably after the destruction of the second temple in 70 CE was withdrawn from the synagogue service and the Shema with its global reference to *all* the commandments and ordinances followed Rabbi Yehuda ha Nasi's writing of the Mishnah in the 2nd century CE Palestine, before which no one actually knew what the law was *in toto*. As well, later, the completion of the Gemara and thus the Talmud made the ten commandments, although sacrosanct, merely the outlines of Jewish theology. The commandments and ordinances, then, were analysed as numbering 613. To which was added the 614th commandment: never forget Hitler, the Nazis, and the Holocaust and presumably contemporary forms of ethnic cleansing whether in the former Yugoslavia, in Rwanda-Burundi, in Myamar.

Presumably the 700,000 Palestinian Arabs who fled in 1947-1948 and whose descendants still live in refugee camps in Gaza, Israel and bordering territories can be regarded as victims of ethnic cleansing under David Ben Gurion's Plan Dalet: to create a geographically contiguous state of Israel. This is not to deny that the invading Arab armies and the Palestinian militias intended, as they put it, "to sweep the Jews into the sea" i.e. to commit genocide.

Thus the Shema goes on to say: “Be mindful of all My commandments (“kol mitzvotai”)...and do them, so shall you be consecrated to your God. I, the Eternal One, am your God who led you out of the land of Egypt to be your God.....”

However this global endorsement of the Being Who is at times a vengeful tribal God urging terrible retribution on, say, the Amalekites, or other Canaanites (or Palestinian armies of resistance) , creates problems for the modern Jew, entailing breaking the ten commandments: thou shalt not kill (except so as to survive yourself as a Jew if fighting the Other who would destroy you as a Jew is the alternative). Note the Shema speaks to Israelites in the old sense not Israelis. In the diasporas we remain Israelites.

One way out of this problem is existential Judaism, which touches on the author’s Kabbalistic belief system and is influenced by Mordecai Kaplan’s (1881-1983) reconstructionist Judaism.

Kaplan emphasised the possible universality of *righteousness* (including amongst Palestinians and Israelis) as present in all societies even when, or especially when, science or political struggle for autochthony erodes religion.

In my case what Kierkegaard called the leap of faith, from an ethical and aesthetic ground on one side of the abyss of nihilism, onto a religious belief system – not necessarily a fundamentalist one - is a belief in God as potentially the “heart of a heartless world” in Marx’s famous phrase. Religion or a philosophical system (Judaism, Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism) expresses Real suffering not necessarily the existence of God. So the Shema asserts God: this can be decoded in existentialism as the leap of faith into even *lovingkindness* (*Hesed*) and *dealing with its dialectical opposite* (*Gevurah*) – force, authority which can be good or evil. To do this we need *Hokhmah* and *Binah*, wisdom and understanding and the power suggested by *Netzach*, truth which is eternal: in this case the Golden Rule: what is hateful to you do not do to others, or love your neighbour (who really *is* your neighbour in an ethical sense) as yourself. *Netzach* is also the truth of Moses at the burning bush where God announces Him/Herself as “I am that I am” or “I am that I shall be” – a statement of the Being-Ness of the Being-of-the-material-and-human-universe and of what it consists in its *thrown-ness*, (arbitrary facticity), *fallen-ness* (fallen-ness from a previous state of grace, and goodness, into evil, sin, ill-fortune, or unjustified prosperity that leads to arrogance cruelty, domination, class- or race-oppression.)