

UP FROM THE PAGE, INTO THE HEART

DANIEL H. GORDIS

Even when I was a child, the “Shema,” one of the central prayers of our faith, troubled me. As soon as I learned the meaning of its Hebrew words, the *Vehayah im shamo*a paragraph—which I already knew by rote—struck me as rather unfair. I knew even then that the second paragraph of this prayer did not specifically claim that the good are immune from suffering, but the clear association it made between our actions and God’s treatment of us certainly implied that this was so.

I could not articulate it then, but as years went by, I learned that the problem that concerned me actually had a name, theodicy, and that it was a classical theological dilemma: Why do the good suffer?

For most of us, there are parts of the liturgy that we recite rather perfunctorily. We may find sections that we do not understand, others may raise issues that make us uncomfortable in everyday conversation, or as in this case, we may find that we simply disagree with what we find in the *tefillah*—the prayer. So it was for me. Twice a day, for years, largely without thought, certainly devoid of prayerful intent, I just recited:

“If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, to love the Lord your God . . . with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season. . . . You will gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass

in the fields for your cattle—and thus you will eat your fill.

“Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you, and [God] will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is giving you.

“Therefore impress these My words upon your heart and bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up . . . to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.” (Deuteronomy 11:13-21)

About five years ago, I had to teach the “Shema” to a group of teenagers at Camp Ramah. I vividly recall the setting—even some of the faces—and my feeling, for the first time in my life, of publicly being embarrassed by the *siddur*.

The “Shema” is not liturgy in the truest sense, I explained to the campers, for it’s a biblical quote. But while that fact should have made matters easier for me, my exposition still rang hollow. After all, we can explain away particular biblical passages that we find troublesome by saying that they are products of a different era or mindset, but how could such a dismissal account for the fact that our rabbinic tradition *consciously* selected Deuteronomy 11 to be a central element of the morning and evening services? There was no denying that

Daniel H. Gordis, ordained at the Jewish Theological Seminary in 1984, is Dean of Students and Lecturer in Rabbis at the University of Judaism.

the ancient rabbis believed Deuteronomy 11 had something important—and timeless—to teach us.

I mentioned my quandary to a friend at camp. “Simple,” he told me. “Use the second paragraph of the ‘Shema’ to teach the idea of covenant.” Terrific, I thought. Use the most obvious example we have of God *losing* His part of the bargain as a way to teach the concept of a pact between people and God. I was still troubled.

Avoidance worked for a while. But the pulpit rabbinate cracked that shell. While campers at Ramah might have permitted a feeble attempt to avoid the issue, inquisitive, often pained, congregants proved much more tenacious. They repeated, rather bluntly, what many of us feel: that the text of *Vehayah im shamoa* makes a rather audacious claim. Its assertion that obedience to God will ensure “rain for [our] land in season” and that only if we sin will God “shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and . . . [we] will soon perish from the [earth]” seems patently false. It posits a relationship between our actions and our fates that life simply does not bear out. If it did, why would we repeatedly find ourselves asking, as Harold Kushner has phrased it, why bad things happen to good people?

For me, there could be no more *davening* without thinking. I needed an answer. It had to make sense to my congregants, and it had to mean something to me. So I sat down—indeed I sat down many days, many times—to a long, sometimes painful, confrontation with the “Shema.” What came out of that struggle was this *devar tefillah*, which gives me a new way of

understanding the prayer, an understanding that allows me finally to recite the entire “Shema” with *kavannah*, with prayerful intent.

Let us look closely at the text. It does not matter that the paragraph speaks specifically of agriculture, while most of us are urban dwellers. Even if the text were not a general theological statement—as it pretty clearly seems to be—the Ethiopias of today make it difficult for us to claim that the size of the harvest has any sort of relation to God’s estimation of our merit as human beings.

Yet this section of the Torah essentially states that human suffering is the product of misguided human actions. We’re not the first to notice this, nor to be troubled by it. Even Maimonides, the great rationalist, who attempted to deal with this paragraph in his *Laws of Repentance* (9:1), could do no more than apologetically explain it as a passage that applies not to our world, but to “the world to come.” Maimonides, like many of us, understood that in the real world in which we live, the central thesis of *Vehayah im shamoa* cannot be justified.

For me, trying to explain this paragraph, all the usual exegetical and pragmatic ways out seemed blocked. Omitting the paragraph, which might have been justifiable with other prayers, was out of the question. Something as central as the “Shema” cannot be deleted; it has to be confronted. Emendations, too, seemed rather silly. We might, at times, alter masculine references to God, we might include matriarchs or omit distasteful references to non-Jews, but purposely to quote a specific biblical

passage, only subsequently to emend it and alter its message seems a rather hollow gesture. If the rabbis who put together the *siddur* had wanted a passage with different language and different meaning, wouldn’t they simply have selected a different passage?

It became clear to me that the only choice I had verged on *midrash*, on a process of creative commentary. Somehow, there had to be a context into which I could place this paragraph so that, in its current form, it could touch thoughtful men and women once again.

So, in the classical midrashic tradition, I returned to the old text—but with a new question. What would happen if the issue changed from “What *does* the prayer mean?” to “What *can* it mean?”

Searching for a new meaning, I confronted a liturgy powerful almost beyond description. Ancient though the *siddur* may be, it continues to speak to the concerns and hopes, fears and aspirations that we today share. The human condition apparently hasn’t changed much in the centuries that most of our prayers have existed. Given this constancy, I had to ask: What—if anything—is there about our world today that is so fundamentally different from the world of past generations that it might not be expressed in the classic texts of the *siddur*? Can I find some issue that is not discussed in the prayerbook, which a rereading of the “Shema” might enable us to address?

Strategy in mind, I turned to the “Shema,” to the text that I always understood to imply that we suffer because we have sinned. What does the paragraph actually say? Plain and

simple, it says that if we sin, the world will be destroyed. To be more exact, it says that if we are "lured away to serve other gods," agricultural production will stop and we as humans—not just Jews, not just sinners, but we as humans—will perish from the earth.

Thus, *Vehayah im shamo*, to use Jonathan Schell's words, is about "the fate of the earth."

The fate of our planet is not an issue of individual concern or responsibility; it is a global matter. Is it, then, not significant that in the paragraph of the "Shema" that precedes the *Vehayah im shamo*, God addresses a singular "you," and that in the *Vehayah im shamo* section, the object changes to the second person plural? The grammar suggests that it is *people*, not one person, who can destroy life. The text speaks of group responsibility.

Perhaps the fact that we today live with a constant fear over the fate of the earth—with the threat of nuclear annihilation—is the one way in which our lives differ radically from the lives of those who preceded us. Perhaps this represents one crucial issue not addressed in the traditional *siddur*. Today, we humans can indeed destroy the earth. Literally. Technological advances in the modern era have, along with their potential for bettering our lives, given us the power to bring an end to agriculture, a stop to nature, and the extinction of all living things—including ourselves. Human beings have created weapons qualitatively different from those ever known before, and in refusing to dispense with them—in refusing to learn how properly to use this power—we continue to worship the

weapons and their—our—power.

We delude ourselves into believing that the more we rely on the weapons, the greater the chance that we will be saved. Our weapons have become gods, our blind reliance on them the idol worship of our time. As the "Shema" says, if this idolatry does not cease, we may find ourselves gone from the face of the earth. And as the "Shema" says, we ourselves will have brought this about; it will be our own fault.

The alternative? Recognizing that "loving the Lord [our] God . . . with all [our] heart and soul" means accepting responsibility; granting the premise of *Vehayah im shamo*—that our actions can, in fact, affect the future of our world; praying that, with the guidance of the "Shema," we, as individuals, as nations, as a species, can find the wisdom to cease our idol worship, can thus ensure that the rain and the grain and the wine and the oil will continue to grace "the good land that the Lord [has given us]."

Yes, this part of the "Shema" can help us pray. It can remind us to teach ourselves—and our children—when we are at home and when we are away, when we lie down and when we wake up, that the fate of the earth does, indeed, depend on us. So we must impress this message upon our hearts, bind these words as signs on our hands and let them serve as symbols on our foreheads, that we might learn and "endure, in the land that the Lord swore to [our] ancestors to give to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth." ★