



Torah Reflections on *Parashat Va-et-hanan*
Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11

13 Av 5767 July 28, 2007

A congregation holds a monthly Service of Comfort and Peace for people who are seeking a quiet, prayerful place during a time of illness, grief or anxiety. The ten or so people who attend sit in a circle; together we sing, meditate, pray and share some thoughts from the Torah. An elderly Russian couple attended a service, accompanied by their grandson, a man in his 30's who--unlike his grandparents--spoke English. He explained that his worried grandparents were there to pray for another grandchild who was having a crisis in his life.

At one point in the service we go around the circle, each person reading one sentence of a prayer in English. Participants are free to pass if they do not wish to read. The grandfather did not seem to understand much of what was happening, but as we went around the circle and it was his turn to read, he closed his eyes and said, "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad."

This man, like so many other Jews throughout the ages, turned to the Shema when all other words failed.

We first hear the Shema from Moses as he addresses the Israelites in the Torah portion for this week (Deuteronomy 6:4). Moses realizes that life will not always be easy, that the people he leads and their descendants will have many hardships, will experience spiritual and physical exile, will be lost and not know where to turn. He offers words of comfort and consolation, some of which have become central to Jewish worship and ritual. The most central, however, and often the first Hebrew words a Jew learns, is the Shema, a deceptively simple declaration of only six Hebrew words, often translated "Hear, O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal is one."

The Shema is a statement of faith and connection. Saying the Shema allows us to declare our faith in a single universal creative power, the Eternal One, through whom all lives including our own are lovingly connected. The Shema in turn asks us to listen with a deep stillness for the *ruah Elohim*, the breath of God, which flows in and through us even in our darkest moments of illness, fear or loneliness.

A woman told me of her practice of saying the Shema as she awakens each day and falls asleep each night. She likes returning to consciousness with words of prayer. She wants to end her day connected to things larger than her particular concerns.

But life is not always so ordinary. Sometimes we are faced with a circumstance or illness that leaves us feeling alone, abandoned or frightened. Saying the Shema, singing it softly, letting the words float on our in and out breath, holding it in mind during

meditation--these are all ways the Shema can help calm our soul and give comfort and connection.

“Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad”

© Bay Area Jewish Healing Center, Rabbi Helen Cohn



This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Helen Cohn of Congregation Chaverim in Tuscon, Arizona. It is brought to you by the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center (a beneficiary of the Jewish Community Federation of San Francisco, the Peninsula, Marin and Sonoma Counties), an affiliate of the Institute on Aging.

The Bay Area Jewish Healing Center provides Jewish spiritual care for people coping with illness, loss and dying, regardless of affiliation or ability to pay.

Our services include:

- Rabbinic care, chaplaincy, counseling and spiritual direction—at home or in hospitals, hospices, nursing homes or other care facilities
- Spiritual support groups for patients, caregivers, and the bereaved
- Healing and memorial services, and specialized rituals

Whether through prayer, study materials, or simply a listening presence, the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center is here to support you during difficult times.