

## Shma

Literally millions of Jews have died uttering the following six words: שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד – Hear O Israel, the Lord is Our God, the Lord is One. These words from the book of Deuteronomy, open the Shma prayer, and are, perhaps, the most important theistic utterance in the Jewish canon. It is, however, not only a theistic utterance but a deeply human utterance. It was the Jewish cry of defiance as we were mercilessly butchered at so many points in our checkered history – you may kill us they said to the Romans, to the Crusaders, and to the Nazis, but our spirit (in the metaphorical sense) will live on.

How as non-theists are we to relate to this text – one way would be to employ its cadences but change the words, thus recalling the defiance without using words which we don't hold as true. Indeed, a couple months ago, there was a lengthy back and forth between Rabbis of the movement, where people offered their versions of the Shma, in which I participated.

As an erstwhile professor of Bible, I have a somewhat different take on Biblical texts and their ritual utterance. Though, I would be the first to say that the Bible doesn't not reflect my system of values, I think knowing what it says is of paramount importance, especially in religious countries such as the United States and Israel. If we don't know what it says then we can't do battle with the narrow literalist readings which continue to exert such a powerful influence on our society. Even more importantly in my mind, the Bible has pride of place in our literary and cultural cannon, and as cultural Jews, relating to the Bible can be intellectually rewarding. This being said, I can totally sympathize (but not agree) with people who see the Bible as a toxic text and want to have nothing to do with it; luckily our cultural canon is so rich that there many more benign options to choose from.

Since I regard knowledge of the Bible as very important (and I am admittedly quite biased here). I prefer to offer appropriate introductions to the biblical passages in

prayer, explaining how we as humanist Jews can relate to them, rather than expunge them or rewrite them, in this vein I introduce the Shma with the following words:

הָיָה רָצוֹן שֶׁבְקִרְיָאָה זֶה, אֲכַבֵּד אֶת אֲמוּנוֹת אֲבוֹתַי וְאֲמוֹתַי, אֲשֶׁר עֲבָדוּ יְהוָה בְּיָרָאָה וּבְהַקְרָבָה. וְאִם עַל פִּי שְׂאִינִי יְכוּל לְתַנּוֹת שִׁירֵי לְאֱלוֹהֵי אֲשֶׁר תִּבְנִית זָכָר לּוֹ: כִּכְתוּב: "פֶּן תִּשְׁחִיתוּן וַעֲשִׂיתֶם לָכֶם פֶּסֶל תְּמוּנַת כָּל סִמּוֹל תִּבְנִית זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה" תּוֹרַתְם צְרוּפָה בְּלִבֵּי כְּשָׂמִיר.

With the reading of this passage, I wish to show my respect for my foremothers and forefathers, who worshipped God with sacrifice and hardship. And though I can offer no song or prayer to an anthropomorphic god (or to any god), as it says: "Be careful lest you make yourselves an idol or any image of a male or female", their traditions are engraved upon the tablet of my heart.