

Parashat Va'etchanan

Gathered on the Plain of Moab, Moses repeats the entire Torah instruction. Indeed, 'Deuteronomy' is the Greek for 'Second Law'. The People are reminded of their divine destiny, their special selection, and of how to know and to serve God. This is the God who has delivered them from bondage and brought them to their inheritance, the Promised Land. This instruction, or teaching, or law, reflects the covenant treaty God has made with Abraham and his descendants. This morning we will deal with that great expression of this covenant love between God and Israel - the Shema. Covenant fidelity or love is termed *hesed* in Hebrew. This love is THE great theme throughout scripture. We are called to apply that love in all the ways directed by God. The Shema is Israel's declaration of loving allegiance to God and its extension to loving our neighbour as ourselves. Note that the first word of the Shema is *Shema* - it means 'Hear'. It is so simple but so demanding that we, as did the Israelites' continually fail to 'Hear.' We concern ourselves with so much extraneous matter.

Let us pause to read the full Shema, together. We will read Deuteronomy 6:4-9, on to 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. This is what is contained in *phylacteries* - small boxes worn by some Jews, attached to forehead and wrists. Also, in the small box attached to doors in houses, to be touched in going in and coming out - a *mezuzah*.

The first verse in the Shema, from Deuteronomy 6:4, is, in many translations, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one." The alternative verse is, "The Lord is our God, the Lord alone." This is less familiar to us but goes back to that medieval Jewish commentator, Ibn Ezra. By this interpretation, Moses is saying to the People, "Look, show loyalty to the Lord alone - love the only God, He is God alone - love Him with heart, soul, and strength." Here we see the key verse as a qualitative and not a quantitative argument about the number of deities. It is a statement about the nature of our relationship with God. The older statement is open to mis-interpretation, especially by those who wish to play the "numbers game".

Moses, in addressing Israel prior to the advance into Canaan, is not concerned with defining the nature of God and is certainly not formulating a creed. He is concerned with calling Israel to loyalty to God; to God ALONE. Hence, he goes on beyond Deut.6:4, to say, in verse 5, "You shall love the Lord Your God with all Your heart, with all Your soul, and with all Your might." Zechariah gets to the nub of the Shema, as covenant love, when he quotes it to describe the conditions of the Age to Come, "And the Lord shall be King over all the earth. In that day it shall be - 'The Lord is one.' And His name is one." Zech.14"9. He is not quoting it as a statement about the nature of God but as one about our relationship with God. For "in that day", we will worship Him ALONE, and His name will be recognised in all the earth.

Jewish Law or *halakhah* directs the worshipper to recite the entire Shema twice daily, "when you lie down and when you rise up". By doing this the worshipper is binding him/her to the God of Israel as sovereign king. Berlin & Brettler - editors of the Jewish Study Bible - comment on this, "Modern readers regard the Shema as an assertion of monotheism, a view that is

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anachronistic. In the context of ancient religion, it served as a public declaration of exclusive loyalty to Hashem as the sole Lord of Israel. By reciting the Shema, the worshipper...re-enters, twice daily, the original covenant ratification ceremony that, in Deuteronomy, took place on the Plain of Moab, east of Jordan. That's quite a thought.

It is in this vein of total loyalty and unity of love in God, that we turn to Mark 12:28-34, as read this morning. As you will know, there was little love between Sadducees and scribes. Sadducees, those priestly ruling aristocrats, who copied up to the Romans. Scribes, having the honour of interpreting the Law in all its rules and regulations. This scribe who approached Yeshua with his question, touched on an age-old debate amongst the Jews. Which is the most important commandment?

Judaism has a double-tendency. Either to expand the Law to hundreds of rules and regulations, or, to try to gather them into one general, inclusive statement or message. We all recall the non-Jew who came to the great 1st c. scholar, Hillel. This hopeful seeker had already visited another 'great' rabbi, Shammai, and been sent packing. Shammai taught that 613 instructions had been received on Mount Sinai - 365 for the days of the year, and 248 for the generations of man. The scribe asked Hillel if he could be taught the entire Torah whilst standing on one foot. Cheeky and odd sort of behaviour, but you get all sorts in religion. Hillel did not turn him away. "On one foot, the most important idea of Judaism is not to do to your fellow man what you would not want done to you. This is the whole Law, the rest is commentary. Go and do it."

There were two schools of thought. Those who believed that some instructions were lighter than others, and greater ones, containing serious principles for living. Secondly, those who considered even the smallest rule/regulation as equally binding, with no distinction to be tolerated. You could say that the time-honoured phrase, "you pay your money and take your choice", applies to all of us. This scribe was asking a red-hot, topical question. Yeshua, in Mark 12, has taken two great commandments and put them together, No rabbi had ever done that before. We have already discussed the first great commandment. What of the second - "You shall love your neighbour as yourself"?

"Love your neighbour as yourself" is Yeshua's quote from Leviticus 19:18. There, it refers to your fellow Jewish neighbour. It was quite OK to hate a Gentile, if you so wished. Yeshua took the verse and gave it no limits as to race. He gave it universal love. The old law was given a new, fresher, meaning; an inclusive meaning, not exclusive. He is saying to us, "Faith is to love God and that leads on to loving all people. That loving of others is proof that you love the Lord your God as one."

"Be warned," Yeshua is saying, "Ritual, rules, regulations, etc, can so easily replace love as worship." It is still so today, be it in synagogue or church. One's personal angst becomes law. We recall Hosea, in Hosea 6:6, where he heard God say to him, "I desire steadfast love and

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not sacrifice." Samuel, in 1 Samuel 15:22, adds burnt offering to those sacrifices. We are to obey His two greatest commandments. This scribe quite saw this. He repeats the Yeshua's words, venturing them superior to all burnt offerings and sacrifices. Impressed, Yeshua told him that he was not far off the Kingdom of Heaven. This must have been wonderfully encouraging to the scribe. I often wonder if he ended up following Yeshua.

Let us close this talk with a prayer

We thank You, Lord, for those two great commandments spoken by You, to the scribe. Thank You for Your infinite love that led You to become our Saviour and Shepherd. We are prone to stray. Take our hands and lead us, lest we fail and fall. Lead us through life's valley and maze and deliver us from our fears, by Your presence and power within us.