

“Superb! ... A gem, as valuable for one beginning to explore Judaism as for one who needs renewal of soul and purpose.”

—RABBI RACHEL COWAN,
author of *Mixed Blessings*

10 HEAD

Hear O Israel

There Is Only One

The best-known of all Jewish prayers, *Shema' Yisra'el*, is, in fact, not a prayer at all.

Prayers are typically addressed to God. Jewish prayers almost always contain the word *You*, spelled in English with a capital *Y*. “Blessed are *You!*” or “*You* are our Deliverer!” or “We call out to *You!*”

This line is addressed to the community: “Hear O Israel!”—Listen, Jews!—“*Y-H-W-H* is our God, *Y-H-W-H* is one!”

How are we to understand Judaism's great proclamation of our monotheistic faith? Let us begin by asking a functional question, the most important question regarding human behavior. What difference does

JUDAISM'S 10 BEST IDEAS

A Brief Guide for Seekers

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monotheism make? One god, ten gods, a thousand—so what? We Jews seem to put so much store in the fact that we believe in one rather than many gods. Why? What is the *payoff* of the great monotheistic revolution?

The only value of monotheism is to make you realize that all beings, every creature—and that means the rock and the blade of grass as well as your pet lizard and your annoying neighbor next door—are all one in origin. You come from the same place. You were created in the same great act of love. God bestowing God's own grace on every creature that would ever come to be. *Therefore*—and this is the key line, the only one that really counts—*treat them that way!* They are all God's creatures, just as you are. They exist only because of the divine presence, the same divine presence that makes you exist. Get to know them! Get to love them! Discover the unique divine gift within each of them as well as the common bond of existence that draws you all together. Live in amazement at the divine light strewn throughout the world. That's what it means to be a religious human being. Even if you do not take the story of creation literally—and I, for one, do not—seeing this amazement and wonder in all of existence is the beginning point of faith.

That is what the *Shema'* means by proclaiming God one. But how do we render that mysterious name

Y-H-W-H, once badly reproduced in English as "Jehovah"? The mystical tradition within Judaism insists on translating God's name as "Being." Really it's not a name at all, not even fully a noun. Y-H-W-H is an impossible conflation of all the tenses of the verb "to be" in Hebrew. HYH means "was" in Hebrew; HWH indicates the present, "is;" YHYH would mean "will be." Put them all together and you get the implausible, and therefore mysterious, verb form Y-H-W-H. It probably would best be translated as "Was-Is-Will Be." But since that's a little awkward to say each time, "Being" will have to do, a "Being" that embraces all of time and space as one, then reaches beyond them into impenetrable mystery.

The meaning here is profound. "God" and existence are not separable from one another. God is not some entity over there who created a separate, distinct entity called "world" over here. There are not two; there is only one. The mystics insist on carrying monotheism that one step further.

To say you believe in one God but then to depict that God as an old fellow with a beard seated on a throne—or in any other single way, taken literally—is just a concentrated form of idolatry. It's like the old story where Abraham says to his father, "The big idol

smashed all the others." You may remember learning the tale: Abraham's father Terah had an idol shop. One day Papa was called away for a while and left his son in charge. Abraham smashed all the idols except the largest one, placing an axe in its hand. When Papa returned and saw the damage, Abraham explained, "The big idol destroyed all the rest!"

"Of course it didn't," Papa is supposed to have said. "It's only an idol."

"Aha!" cried out Abraham. And that "Aha!" was the beginning of the monotheistic revolution.¹ The same is true in each of our spiritual lives. If it's just about numbers, all you've got left is one big idol. Far too many people leave it at that. The real change has to be in the way you see existence itself.

In fact, the way you say "existence" in Hebrew is *HaWáYáH*, just a rearrangement of the four letters of God's secret name. To see God when you look at existence is a grand rearranging of the molecules. Seeing the *big* picture instead of the many smaller ones. God is Being when you see the whole picture, the way it all fits together, with the eyes of wonder. Of course we can't ever really see all of that big picture. The whole is infinitely more than the totality of its parts. Mystery remains.

But wait a minute. Then where did "the Lord" come from? Don't most translations read this verse as "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one?" How did that get there?

Pronouncing the name Y-H-W-H aloud has been taboo since very ancient times. Supposedly only the high priest could say it, only on the holiest day of the year, and only in the holiest place, the Temple's innermost chamber. When the people in the courtyard heard it, they all fell on their faces. But the word Y-H-W-H appears multiple times on nearly every page of the Bible. How are you supposed to study and teach it if you can't say the word?

A little more than two thousand years ago, someone came up with a substitute. Every time the text says "Y-H-W-H," you say *Adonay*, which means "My Lord." It was an act of piety, a way of submitting, of saying "O Y-H-W-H, I am Your servant."

Now, to be a servant of Being is not a bad idea. It means to treat all existence with respect, to show a combination of love and reverence to each creature, to be a conveyor of universal compassion. Great! But something happened along the way. Once people started saying "Lord," they began to picture that elderly nobleman, the white-bearded white guy on a throne. They became his

servants, not servants of Being, worshipping the image of God rather than the mystery behind it. How easily religion slides into idolatry!

This is the secret truth. Listen to one of the great sages, the Hasidic master Sefat Emet (1847–1905), who let this secret out of the bag in a letter he wrote to his children and grandchildren:

The proclamation of oneness that we declare each day in saying Shema' Yisra'el needs to be understood in its true meaning. It is entirely clear to me ... based on the writings of the great kabbalists ... that the meaning of "Y-H-W-H is One" is not that He is the only God, negating other gods (though this too is true!), but that there is a deeper truth: there is no being other than God. This is true even though it seems otherwise to most people.... Everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself. It was only because of the contraction [zimzum], willed by God that holiness descended rung after rung, until actual physical things were created out of it.

These things are true without a doubt. Because of this, every person can be joined to God from any place, through the holiness that exists within every

single thing, even corporeal things. You only have to be negated (that is, to transcend the ego-self) in the spark of holiness.²

But now I have to turn back to the beginning of our non-prayer. "Hear O Israel." Who is "Israel" in this phrase?

Remember where the word comes from. Our ancestor Jacob once had an all-night wrestling match with an angel. A tough bird, that Jacob. Even an angel couldn't best him. When dawn came, the angel said, "Let me go! Time to sing God's praises!"

"Not a chance," Jacob said, "not until you bless me." So Jacob came out of that encounter with a new name: Israel, "Struggler with God."

That name has been carried by the Jewish people through history, and we bear it with pride. We don't have all the answers. Our notion of divine truth keeps growing and changing throughout our lives. But we struggle. It is the effort, the engagement, the not letting go of the question that makes us *Israel*, wrestlers with God.

But such a name cannot be the exclusive property of just a single human tribe. I believe that name belongs to all strugglers. Everyone who wrestles with angels, who struggles to make sense out of life, is part of some broader community called "Israel." There is an Israel

defined by history, synonymous with the Jewish People. There is now a state of Israel as well, defined by its citizenry, including Jews, Arabs, and others. But there is yet another Israel, the undefined "nation" of all who seek and struggle.

Shema' Yisra'el, Y-H-W-H Eloheinu, Y-H-W-H ehad!
 "Listen, all you who struggle, all you who wrestle with life's meaning! Being is our God, Being is one!"

Don't look beyond the stars. There's no need to stretch your neck. God is right here, filling all of existence with endless bounty. Look around you. Look within. Open your eyes. Find God's presence in each and every creature and in the unified, transforming vision of all that is. *That's* what it means to belong to Israel, the people who struggle with God.



Notes

Chapter 10: *Ehad*—Hear O Israel

1. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:13.
2. Yehuda Leib Alter of Ger, *Otsar Mithavim uMa'amarim* (Jerusalem: Machon Ga-haley Esh, 1986), pp. 75–76.

