

Rosh Hashanah 5772 (2011)

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“Sh’ma Mina: Learn from This”

In my family, the old running joke was “gotta eat.” As a kid I once asked my mother why we were having a big meal with my grandparents on Christmas day. “Because,” she said, “your father and grandfather are off from work, and you kids are off from school, so it’s a chance to get together.” “Yes,” I protested, but why such a festive meal on a day that’s not our holiday?” “Well,” she replied, “we’ve gotta eat.”

Let me ask you a trick question: What key factor determines the ritual clock for Jews? I’ll make it more to the point: The Torah tells us that we’re required to recite the Sh’ma every evening and morning, *b’shoch’b’cha uv’kumecha*. How did the Rabbis figure out the proper time to say it, and why?

Now I’m asking for a reason. First, you and I have just dived into the most massive and extensive liturgical experience of the Jewish year. So I want to know what all of this means at its simple core.

Second, you and I have a hunch that there's more to all of this than what is generally called "praying to God." Praying to God may have little to do with it. Waking *ourselves* up to some basic Godly message is probably more to the point. So what's the message? What's the take-away from today, other than "hey, we gotta eat"? Unless "gotta eat" *is* in fact the message.

Let me take you to the very first page of the Talmud. The Talmud is twenty thick volumes long. It has sixty-three tractates. If you were on the editorial committee of the Talmud at the end of the fifth century CE, wouldn't you choose as the lead-off discussion something that would set the tone for the entire enterprise?

So it begins like this: "*mey-eymatai korin et sh'ma b'arvin?* From when may we recite the Sh'ma in the evening?" And because this is Rabbinic Judaism, it will give several answers. It will even make a joke about Rabban Gamliel's sons coming home from carousing all night and admitting they hadn't yet said it, whereupon Dad tells them they have until the crack of dawn to get it done.

But the answer that sets the tone is this: “From when may we recite the Sh’ma in the evening? From the time that the Kohanim, the priests, enter their houses to eat their *terumah*.”

What is *terumah*? Food contributed as a tax to the Kohanim by regular Israelites, since Kohanim didn’t own land and grow their own food. Only Kohanim could eat this food. But it was plain old food. It wasn’t even sacrificial food. Just food. Just dinner. Just evening supper.

Now realize the Rabbis’ ingenious answer: How do we determine when to recite the touchstone liturgy of all Judaism? Not by when the Kohanim offer some solemn sacrifice and thereby bring purification to some otherwise impure individual or situation. Rather, we recite the Sh’ma at the time when the priest sees the sun is going down, and he can no longer offer any sacrifices for that day, so he takes off his high and holy garments, washes up, and goes home to have dinner with his wife and kids.

How else to say it? We know when to recite our most important devotional words based on the moment when high holiness takes a back seat to basic human needs; to food and family and parenting.

You would think the evening Sh'ma would be our way of taking note of nature in all its grandeur; the earth spinning from daylight to darkness, promising to return us to sunlight and another Sh'ma. The great order of the cosmos. Our tiny selves submitting to divine unity and splendor.

But no. Rather, we turn to the divine as a basic need, reminded by the even more basic need of the evening meal after a hard day's honest labor. The Kohen sees the stars come out, say the Rabbis, and he goes home.

Kohen? What Kohen? Oh him? That's just Yonkel. Yonkel Faigenholtz. Sure he's a kohen, but we know him as the guy who goes home to eat at the end of the day. I mean, after all, he's got a family to tend to. I mean, hey, he's got priorities. Say! Have you got anything to eat? Need a meal? Can you spare a meal? Hey! Gotta eat, you know.

Then someone in this opening discussion of the Talmud remembers an alternate tradition. He says, I know a version of this question that starts the same way but gives a different answer. It goes like this: “From when may we say the evening Sh’ma? From the time that the poor man comes home to eat his bread with salt until he rises from his meal.” Hey, doesn’t that contradict the other answer?

The Rabbis work this problem until they solve it with one of the most telling phrases in all of Talmudic literature. They say: “The poor man and the Kohen have the same time...” In other words, both of them work until it gets dark and they can’t go any longer, and then they both trudge home to eat. True, one has a nice meal waiting for him, while the other goes home to bread and salt, and a five-minute seating at best. But the need is the same. And that’s the point.

The Rabbis note another possibility: we could link our Sh’ma to the time that regular people eat their Shabbat dinner. But they conclude that regular people don’t have the same clock as either the Kohen or the poor. Thus, regular people – who are the ones who are going to have to recite this evening Sh’ma in the first place – should set their internal clocks by both the holiest person in Israel *when*

he's not doing his holy thing and the poorest person in Israel *when he is simply trying to get by*.

And since this constitutes the lead-off discussion of the Rabbis' foundational idea of fixed communal and individual prayer times, it essentially establishes the notion that for Jews prayer is linked to an awareness of human need, and especially, of human *neediness*.

Yes, we pray *when* the stars come out. We pray *when* the new moon of autumn appears in the sky, as it will today. We pray *when* the sun sets on the sixth day of the week, or *when* the column of light, the *amud hashachar*, cracks the dawn. But we pray *because* the poor are in need of more bread and salt, and *because* working people from the highest to the lowest stations of society need to re-connect with their stomachs and their families and their loved ones.

So it may not be such a misnomer to say that we daven today's service, shofar and all, in order to go home and have our Yom Tov lunch. Gotta eat!

But you know where I'm leading you. I'm asking you to turn your thoughts simultaneously to the holy *and* to the needy; to the birth of the cosmos *and* to the hunger pains of the poor and the unemployed. I'm not going to read statistics to you, since you already know them and they will only make you nod off even before your big Yom Tov meal.

I would, however, urge you to think – as we go through the powerful list of ‘who shall live and who shall die’ in the rest of today’s liturgy – to think about all of those secular and religious points of contact we have with good persons of every faith – locally and globally – to remember what it ultimately means to dare to let words of prayer cross our lips:

I invite you to contemplate the work of the Westchester Coalition for the Hungry and Homeless; Westchester’s Food Patch organization; Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger; and Hazon, with its “vision” of environmental sustainability; to think about the Global Hunger Shabbat initiative sponsored in November by the American Jewish World Service; and the UJA-Federation, and the work it has done through all of its beneficiaries to help unemployed Jews and non-Jews alike find their way back to work and dignity through its Connect-to-Care program; to the

Joint Distribution Committee that still brings aid to the impoverished of our people across the globe after all these decades of service; and of course to our own BAS Cares; and our social action chevra's food drive going on between now and Sukkot; and our Bikkur Cholim chevra and our new BAS Connections initiative, all designed to help people in one way or another to "come home."

I invite you today to think of our brothers and sisters in the State of Israel, who this summer – in the face of all the whirlwind of activity surrounding the Palestinian statehood proposal at the UN – pitched symbolic tents in every little town and large city in the land, not unlike our own tent, at least in purpose; who, in a sense, turned politics if not on its head then surely on its side, in order to say to themselves and the world that a society run by the Jewish people will not tolerate the obscenity of an ever-widening gap between haves and have-nots, if it means that the have-nots don't have a place to come home to or a meal to sit down to; that a Jewish society runs as much on a vision as it does on a budget; that a Jewish society – or any society in which Jews are involved - works according to the sacred principle that the Kohen Gadol and the poorest man in town see the same stars, and feel the same pangs in the belly, and come home to essentially the same table.

Now back to our Talmudic episode: The Rabbis conclude this little discussion with the words “*sh’ma mina*,” literally “learn from it,” “hear from it,” or more idiomatically, “derive from it.” This is a Talmudic term meaning that one may derive halakhic norms or behaviors from the preceding discussion and summation. So, in the case of our discussion, “*sh’ma mina*,” know that since both the Kohanim and the poor would go home when the stars first came out, you should conclude that that’s the earliest moment when you, a regular person, could begin your evening Sh’ma, or what eventually became the Ma’ariv, or evening service. *Sh’ma mina*. Learn from it.

But don’t learn it from the stars! Learn it from the humanity of the situation! Learn it on the one hand from the flesh-and-blood humanity of the most powerful person in society. Learn it on the other hand from the empathy you feel for the lowliest and neediest one among you.

See the pun? *Sh’ma mina* means “learn or derive from this.” But it can also mean “literally derive the *Sh’ma* from this.” Your *Sh’ma*, your sum total of prayerful words, from the simple evening Sh’ma to the elaborate services of Rosh Hashanah

and Yom Kippur and every big and little b'rachah in between, should come *mina* -
from this awareness of what really matters in God's world. Dignity. Humanity.
Justice. Communal caring.

Sh'ma mina. Learn it from this tent. Learn it from these thousands of words, all
derived from the basic evening utterance. Learn it from the one who goes home to
eat his bread and salt. From those who put down their tools and go home to eat a
meal with loved ones. And from those who provide for everyone in need, and who
will not say amen until all who are hungry can go to work like a mensch, and then
come home and eat like a mensch.

Sh'ma mina. Let us learn from *this*.

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