

Hear O Israel: Thoughts on Parashat Va-et-hanan, July 24, 2010

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This week's Torah reading includes the Shema--the classic statement of Jewish faith: Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. We are commanded to recite this passage each morning and each evening as a confirmation of our "accepting the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven".

This passage must be recited with devotion and concentration. The general custom is to place one's hand over the eyes while reciting the first verse of the Shema, as a way of increasing one's level of concentration. Among many Sephardim, the custom is to hold the hand over the eyes in such a way that one's fingers are formed into the Hebrew letters shin, dalet, yod--spelling out the name of God, Shaddai. (The three middle fingers form a shin, the bent thumb forms a dalet, and the bent little finger forms a yod.)

Given the centrality of this mitzvah, we would naturally expect the recitation of the Shema to be a highlight of Jewish spirituality. In reciting the Shema, we focus intently on the Unity of God and on our vital relationship with the Almighty.

The Talmud, though, reports a surprising story (Berakhot 13b).

Rav was an outstanding student of Rabbi Yehuda haNasi, the famed compiler of the Mishnah. Rabbi Yehuda was known as the leading sage of his generation, a man of impeccable erudition and piety. Rav attended Rabbi Yehuda's classes every day, and was attentive to his teacher's words and gestures. But he was perplexed. He commented to Rabbi Hiyya that he never saw Rabbi Yehuda haNasi "accepting upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven" i.e. he never saw Rabbi Yehuda saying the Shema. Rabbi Hiyya replied: when Rabbi Yehuda brushes his hand over his eyes--that's when he recites the Shema and accepts upon himself the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven.

We learn that the great Rabbi Yehuda haNasi performed this central mitzvah of faith in such an inconspicuous way that even his devoted student didn't notice him doing so! His spirituality was so deep and so internal that it did not manifest itself in a manner visible to others.

It is sometimes mistakenly believed that a "spiritual" person is someone who "looks" or "acts" in a distinctively "spiritual" manner. People sometimes think that to be spiritual one must shake and shudder, pray in a loud voice, close one's eyes in prolonged meditation etc. The story about Rabbi Yehuda haNasi's recitation of the Shema teaches us that true spirituality can be (should be!) entirely natural and unnoticed by others. The goal of spirituality is not to impress others, but to come close to God in a personal way. True spirituality requires privacy--a private and intimate sense of being in God's presence.

Jewish folk tradition speaks of 36 hidden righteous people in each generation, upon whom the existence of the universe depends. Significantly, these 36 righteous people must be "hidden"--no one can tell who these individuals are; even they can't tell if they're among the 36. The most righteous people are those whose righteousness often goes undetected, who conduct themselves with modesty, who shun the public spotlight. Righteousness, like spirituality, flourishes in an environment of privacy and humility.

The prophet Micah taught (6:8): "And what does the Lord require of you: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God."

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