Shema!!--Thoughts for Parashat Va'et'hanan

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Va’et’hanan

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One” (Devarim 6:4).

This week’s Parasha includes this clarion call of Israel’s faith. We affirm the Oneness of God and acknowledge God’s unique relationship with our People. We accept upon ourselves the “yoke of the kingdom of Heaven.”

But in referring to God as One, we also call to mind the prophecy of Zechariah (14:9): “And God shall be sovereign over all the earth; in that day God will be One and His name One.” A time will surely come when all the world will recognize One God and will live righteous, Godly lives.

But we don’t live in such times now. Our world is plagued with violence and war, hatred and hypocrisy, ignorance, poverty…and so many more evils. When we say the Shema, we proclaim God’s sovereignty—even though we see that so much of the world does not acknowledge that sovereignty. We envision a messianic time, but we do not live in that time.

Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, one of the great Talmudic scholars of 20th century America, offered an explanation as to why we cover our eyes when we say the Shema. It is generally suggested that we cover our eyes in order to concentrate more fully on the words. Rabbi Hutner provided a different insight: we cover our eyes so that we don’t see the world as it is at this moment. With our eyes open, we see widespread Godlessness and evil. Reality does not reflect God’s sovereignty over humanity. We close our eyes to avoid the blatant contradiction between the world as it is and the world as it should be.

Sometimes we see most clearly when our eyes are closed! We can shut off the negative stimuli and concentrate on the ultimate truths…on faith in One God, on dreams of a messianic time, on a world where God is One and humanity is in harmony.

Reciting the Shema is a proclamation of faith in God and in the ultimate redemption of humankind. Close your eyes and think about that.