

Echoes of Eden

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Parashat Va'etchanan

Is “One” a Number?

To a large extent, the Book of Devarim is a polemic against idolatry. Moshe instructs, cajoles and admonishes as he attempts to inspire the people to follow one God. In the portion of VaEtchanan especially, there is a positive declaration, which is often described as the credo of Judaism: “Hear o Israel: God is our Lord, God is One.” In this same *parasha*, we find a negative formulation of this same principle: “...for God is the Lord and there is no other aside from Him.” Both statements seem to teach the same idea: monotheism, belief in one God. There are, however, some nuances that should not go unexamined.

Rabbi Soloveitchik offered an interpretation of the *shema* that may otherwise have been missed: The word *ehad*, which is usually rendered “one,” should in this case be understood as “unique.” The distinction is not simply a question of mathematics; it is not that we differ from others in that we limit the number of our deities. This concise statement of our faith does not simply compare Judaism’s belief in “only” one God with the dualism or polytheism of other belief systems. According to this view, the declaration, “Hear o Israel, God is our Lord, God is unique” has implications for the nature of that One God: The Deity is completely different, unquantifiable; God alone is *sui generis*, singular and unparalleled. This is our God: The One who creates and sustains the universe is not simply quantitatively different from polytheistic deities, but qualitatively different as well.

What is the nature of this uniqueness? By definition, to create the universe means to exist outside of creation. This universe and all that it contains were created; not so the Being who created it all. The Creator transcends time, space and matter, and is not subject to any of the laws of physics.

This basic, irrefutable principle of Judaism leads to the second statement, “There is no other aside from Him.” At first glance, these two statements appear to teach the same idea, albeit in inverse formulations: There is but one God. All other “forces”

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or powers are not merely impotent, they are nonexistent. However, the kabbalists delve deeper into the significance of this seemingly redundant declaration. They understand the second statement to mean, “There is nothing other than Him.” This kabbalistic insight may be expressed as a mathematical challenge: How is the creation of a finite universe possible, when the starting point is an infinite God?

Simply put, adding a finite number to an infinite one will always yield infinity. One cannot add to infinity; the sum total always remains infinite. How, then, is our existence possible alongside an Infinite God?

This three-word phrase, “*ein od milvado*,” (“There is nothing other than Him”) is actually a profound philosophical and existential statement: There is nothing outside of God. Nothing else truly exists. Reality is God; God is the only reality. While we may “see” many false gods, sense and experience many illusionary realities, there is in fact only one reality – the infinite God who cleared away a small corner of His infinite existence in order to allow our finite universe to coexist. Everything that exists within the finite universe does so at the will of the Infinite God. Should He cease to allow this to be so, our finite universe would be subsumed into God’s infinite reality.

The Jewish formulation is not that every aspect of creation *is* God, rather that God sustains every aspect of creation, allowing its coexistence with infinity. We can, indeed, perceive God in all of creation, but we, unlike pantheists or polytheists, understand that what we are in fact perceiving is an expression of God’s will, and not some other life force.

For the believer, the existence beyond our own - that existence in which God does not limit Himself for our benefit - is the place of reality. It is infinite and unchanging; it is eternal and permanent. Our finite, fleeting existence is a mere echo of that reality. However, we have been given certain tools that allow us to access that reality: Torah study allows us to observe our own existence from the perspective of the Infinite. Observance of the commandments allows us to develop

our relationship with God and to connect with reality. The Torah allows us to perceive God's will, to hear God's voice, as it were. Prayer allows us to approach and speak to God, constituting the second side of the dialogue between God and man. Leading a life of holiness, individually and as a community, allows us to become a part of that other, infinite existence that we call eternity.

When man was first created and placed in Eden, the sense and spirit of the infinite which hovered in the Garden was more immediate and accessible. Our quest, ever since then, has been to seek the road back to Eden and to that experience of the Omnipresent God. Man's search for God is the search for reality; nothing in our physical universe is as real as the relationship with God.

When we say *shema* we recognize that God is, was, and will be; God is infinite. Saying the *shema* connects us with infinity, with a reality that is so much greater than our human existence that we close and cover our eyes, averting our gaze from an experience that is so intense and intimate. Precisely because the *shema* connects us with the infinite nature of God Himself, it has been uttered by millions of Jewish martyrs throughout history.

When we declare "*ein od milvado*" - there is none/nothing other than God - we recognize that God is reality. God allows us, despite our limitations and shortcomings, to coexist with His infinite and perfect existence. Only when we emulate and imitate His willingness to coexist with others in an imperfect world do we come closer to God. This is how we can bring a touch of infinity into our lives. This is how we "get real."

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For a more in-depth analysis see:
<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/07/essays-and-audio-on-vetchanan.html>