

Shabbat shalom.

Today, I'm going to be talking about the second paragraph of the Shema, which is in this week's Torah portion, Parshat Ekev! So, to give some context, there are three paragraphs in the Shema, one of the most important prayers in Judaism which is said **three** times a day. These paragraphs are all cobbled together from different chapters in Numbers and Deuteronomy.

The first and third paragraphs are pretty well-known. They talk about loving God and remembering God, and they're basically the what and how of the Shema; the **what**— it is important to love God, and the **how** to love God— through different daily actions and the use of ritual objects such as mezuzot (which you put on doorposts) and tzitzit (show yours- which are what these are). These paragraphs are often chanted aloud, and overall, they're highlighted as a part of the service.

The second paragraph of the Shema, however, is a different story. In many Reform prayer books, it's actually edited out, and when said in prayer, it's often whispered, if even said at all. Well, I actually think this paragraph is pretty important and meaningful. This paragraph is the **why** of the prayer. It talks about the rewards of following God's commandments and the consequences of not doing so. Also, it speaks about nature- something that isn't mentioned in the first and third paragraphs.

The natural world is emphasized in both the rewards and the punishments mentioned in this paragraph, especially

rain. In fact, there are **three** different Hebrew words for rain in this paragraph: *matar*, which is a generic umbrella term for rain and is mentioned **twice**, *yoreh*, a word for rain early in the rainy season, and *malkosh*, a word for rain late in the rainy season.

Why, though? Why are there so many mentions of rain in different places and different ways? The Torah itself makes it clear – God blesses us through rain and curses us through drought. Which may mean God's mad at California for some reason.

In the second paragraph of the Shema, Deut 11:14, God says if you follow Me...you will be taken care of – rain will fall, food will grow and you will eat and be satisfied. To sum it up, rain = good. Rain will water your crops, which you'll then eat, and you won't starve to death. Pretty simple, pretty practical. Professor Gary Rendsburg wrote in an article that rain is one of the sole sources of water for agriculture in Israel, unlike places like Mesopotamia and Egypt which depend on their rivers to irrigate their crops. Pretty important, huh?

Another way to think about rain is as a symbol of connection between heaven and earth. Rain cycles through soil and clouds – it exists in both places – sky and ground. It connects the divine and human realms and brings the sky's moisture onto the earth.

Now, the rabbis of the Talmud knew rain was a life or death issue. On the first page of Tractate Taanit, Rabbi Yohanan said: "There are three keys in the hand of the Holy One,

Blessed be, which were not transmitted to an intermediary. (Meaning only God holds these keys). And they are: The key of rain, the key of birthing, and the key of the resurrection of the dead.” The whole tractate focuses on when rains don’t come and what to do. There are laws about having communal fasts and prayers to try to convince God to bring the rains. To use the key to open the heavens.

And it doesn’t stop there. Rav Yehuda said in the Talmud that “the day of rain is greater than the day on which the Torah is given.” And Rabbi Yoḥanan said: The day of the rains is as great as the day of the ingathering of the exiles. (when all the Jews who are scattered all over the world will be united). And Rabbi Yoḥanan also said: The day of the rains is great, as **even armies** stop fighting on it.

And there are actually multiple stories in the Talmud about Honi HaMagal and his grandchildren praying for God to send rain. They each pray in different ways, with different attitudes, and God answers their prayers.

Moving on to the punishment bit, the second paragraph of the Shema says this, “[if you don’t follow my commandments...] God’s anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be **no** rain and the ground will **not** yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that God is giving to you.” So, if you love and follow God– it rains and you eat. And if not....no rain and no food.

Some people see these consequences as God saying, “follow me or die!” Oof, right? You can see why some people skip over it.

Honestly, at first, I was kind of one of those people. I thought “that’s pretty harsh!” and I still stand by that. However, when I think of it now, I think deeper. I think of **why** there’s a punishment. (slow) And I think that God gives us consequences so we can learn that we shouldn’t do what we did to get the bad thing. **It’s God’s way of making us see our mistakes so we can learn from them.**

Think of our environmental situation. It’s terrible. Really, it’s awful. And it’s **all because of human behavior**. When we make the environment unhealthy, then we see the consequences. And while some won’t accept that climate change is real and caused by humans, others do see this and are trying to right the wrongs. And by offering a reward for doing the right thing, God is not only giving us an incentive, we are also able to see what is good. We’re able to know what we should do.

And as rewards spring from small innovations like clean energy and the small things people are doing like tree planting projects, we know that things like that work. **All in all, I believe the second paragraph of the Shema is God’s way of working through us to make sure we live sustainably.**

After researching the second paragraph of the Shema, I’ve decided that it’s actually a **really important** part of the prayer that everyone should pay attention to...or at least,

more attention than it usually gets. In fact, I believe it is beyond worthy to be a part of my nightly recitation of the Shema.

For years now, I've been chanting the first paragraph of the Shema before bed each night. Recently, I learned the third paragraph to read at this shul for my 12th Hebrew birthday, which inspired me to make my own tallit. I added that to my bedtime ritual, and now, I have finally started to chant the complete Shema- **all three paragraphs**. This is a meaningful thing to me, especially as this is **all** a part of my preparation for my bat mitzvah.

One final thing about the second paragraph of the Shema –hang in there, I'm almost done–is that it is in the plural. That reminds me that Jewish people all over the world are also saying this prayer- it connects me to them. And it connects me to the generations of ancestors– my great great great grandparents– that I never knew –who knew and said this prayer, too.

So, today, as a bat mitzvah, I **celebrate the community who helps me say these words, the people before me who have said these words, the earth on which I say them and I hope that the words of our prayers matter and lead to action to make the world a better place.**

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