



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Va'etchanan 5768

By Rabbi Dorothy A. Richman

August 16, 2008

You who live secure
In your warm houses
Who return at evening to find
Hot food and friendly faces:

Consider whether this is a man,
Who labors in the mud
Who knows no peace
Who fights for a crust of bread
Who dies at a yes or a no.
Consider whether this is a woman,
Without hair or name
With no more strength to remember
Eyes empty and womb cold
As a frog in winter.

Consider that this has been:
I commend these words to you.
Engrave them on your hearts
When you are in your house, when you walk on your way,
When you go to bed, when you rise.
Repeat them to your children.
Or may your house crumble,
Disease render you powerless,
Your offspring avert their faces from you.

Shma

Primo Levi¹

Primo Levi wrote this poem in the shadow of the Holocaust, but his vision is especially relevant in the context of contemporary global inequity. It challenges all who live in comfort while others subsist in privation. Why does he use the frame of the *Shma* to do so?

Found in the center of this week's *parshah*, the *Shma* is a prayer declaring God's singularity: "Listen, O Israel! The Lord is our God. The Lord is one."² The *Shma* is repeated twice daily: in the morning and at night. It is often the first prayer taught to a child, and, famously, the *Shma* has been recited as the last words of many Jewish martyrs.

¹ Primo Levi, a Jewish-Italian poet and writer. Translated by Ruth Feldman and Brian Swann.

<http://www1.yadvashem.org/education/learningEnvironment/english/Poetry/poetry.htm>.

² There is extensive debate about the correct translation of the verse. Many translations replace the word "one" with "alone." The term "the *Shma*" can mean many things. It can refer variously to the one verse (Dvarim 6:4) or to a unit of three selections from the Torah, including

Primo Levi, in titling his poem, "*Shma*," attempts to redefine this traditional prayer. His poem commands a single-minded focus not on the unity of God but on a sub-set of God's creatures, people living in poverty and chaos. Levi insists that human suffering is what our people should be "listening" to: as per the *Shma*, these sounds and images should be engraved on our hearts and follow us through our day. Effectively, they should be the frames of our experience.

How are we to hear this suffering? In one sense, it has never been easier. With the click of a mouse, one can access detailed information about any number of tragedies in the developing world. On the AJWS website, one can receive updates on Darfur, Zimbabwe, Burma, and too many other countries experiencing crises of violence, poverty and disease.

But listening is not enough. The verb *shma* carries additional meanings—it also denotes doing, obeying, performing, acting. Perhaps Levi titled his poem, "*Shma*," precisely for its multiple meanings. He wanted to jolt his reader, through graphic and painful images, into action. Emmanuel Levinas, a famous contemporary Jewish philosopher, described the traditional *Shma* as "an awakening: 'Hear, Israel!'"³

I read the poem's upsetting closing curses as a contemporary warning: if we do not awaken, if we will not hear, if we do not use our blessings of privilege to improve the situation of those who suffer privation, we deny our own power to create change. There are serious consequences to this failure of action.

There are many ways to respond to the voices of those who suffer: to educate ourselves on issues of global justice, to volunteer, to advocate, to share our resources. The *Shma*, according to Jewish law, is supposed to be said aloud. It makes sense: we are crying out to one other: "Listen, Israel! Act!" This week, will you hear it?



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Dvarim 6:4-9, Dvarim 11:13, 21 and Bamidbar 15:37-41, or to an entire unit of prayer with additional blessings before and after the biblical selections.

³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1982. p. 25

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