



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

GENESIS > Vayechi

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January 3, 2015
Vayechi

**A Bumper Sticker for the
New Year**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

In a line or two, bumper stickers can sum up a person's beliefs. Though often no more than cute cliché, a well thought out brief description can capture more than volumes. As they say: short is long.

So, what is the Jew's bumper sticker?

After the year that was, what would you write on your bumper as a slogan for 2015?

The past calendar year was a challenging year on many fronts. Our brothers and sisters in Israel were under constant attack, and anti-Semitism throughout the world (often masquerading as anti-Zionism) reached frightening heights.

As Jews, what can we do to ensure that 2015 is a better year – a year of peace, of spiritual clarity, of physical prosperity and, ultimately, of redemption? What one line can help us guide the vehicle of life through ruts and ditches and arrive at a better destination?

The answer lays in a conversation that took place in Egypt 3,520 years ago between Jacob – who was then on his deathbed – and his twelve sons, who would become the Twelve Tribes of Israel.

This sermon also contains two stories that demonstrate the power of the Shema recited by the Twelve Tribes then and recited by us today.

A BUMPER STICKER FOR THE NEW YEAR

1. One Liners and Bumper Stickers (Humor)

One-liners are an art form that goes back to the beginning of time. For example, “Let there be light” could be deemed an illuminating one-liner.

When a central idea is distilled into such little ink, its power becomes all the more immense, like some kind of concentrate. As they say: short is long.

Groucho Marx famously quipped, “I never forget a face, but in this case I’ll make an exception.” Dorothy Parker summed up money like this: “If you want to know what God thinks of money, just look at the people He gave it to.”

Often people commit their favorite aphorisms to a bumper sticker and put it on their car for all the world to see. Though often no more than cute cliché, a well thought out brief description can capture more than volumes.

Cruising along the highway, going from here to there, your eye will suddenly rest upon the bumper sticker affixed to the car in front of you. The bumper sticker conveys the driver’s philosophy of life. Some popular ones are:

- GOD IS MY DRIVER
- MEN ARE PROOF WOMEN CAN TAKE A JOKE
- I’M HAVING AN OUT OF MONEY EXPERIENCE
- IF YOU CAN READ THIS, I’VE LOST MY TRAILER
- ALL MEN ARE ANIMALS, SOME JUST MAKE BETTER PETS

Life is a highway. We traverse it in the vehicles that are our bodies. A bumper sticker is affixed to our everyday movements, expressing our philosophies and what we deem important.

Obviously, life cannot be summed up in a few words, but years of experience can yield a short expression that describes the enormity of life's journey. Similar to vision or mission statements: They capture the essence of an entity of just a few words.

New Year's is a good time to question our bumper stickers, to refine our taglines, to flesh out the one-liners that define our principles and convey our dearest beliefs. If we can create a one-line mission statement, a bumper sticker, a tagline that will define how we wish to arrive at every decision, then our whole lives, in all its details, will be directed, like spokes of a hub, by this purpose.

2. Year In Review

The past calendar year, 2014, was one of great tumult for the Jewish people: from rockets raining down upon Israel, to the war in Gaza, to the synagogue slaughter of Jews in *tallit* and *tefillin*. Not unusual, as Jews are effected, so is the world. It has also been a stormy year for the world at large: the rise of ISIS, the execution of hostages, the loss of multiple aircrafts, the battle over Ukraine and the outbreak of Ebola, the volatile race question in the United States, the terrorist attacks in Canada, Pakistan, Asia, Africa and throughout the Middle East.

Is there one sentence that can sum up what we would like the coming calendar year to be, and how we can get there?

3. The Shema

Surely, the Torah is not into taglines and bumper stickers. But, as every single word in the Torah is overflowing with meaning, certainly there are particular sentences that embody our mission here on earth. Indeed, the Torah is known for its inimitable ability to capture comprehensive themes, entire narratives, in a few short words, and often, in a word or two.

If you asked most Jews to share one verse from the Torah that would capture the essence of what it means to be a Jew, in all likelihood he or she would recite the famous words of the *Shema*:

*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad – Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.*¹

This isn't pasted onto our bumpers; this is engraved onto our souls. Jews have been reciting this prayer every morning and evening (and several more times daily) for thousands of years. The *Shema* has been recited from praying lips in thanks, and tortured lips in agony. It has been uttered in the sacred city of Jerusalem and in the blood-soaked hell of Auschwitz. If a "bumper sticker" sums up a person's ideology, the *Shema* is the one sentence that conveys the Jew's essence: God is One.

We get the *Shema* from the Torah's Book of Deuteronomy, but the *Shema* has been recited long before the Torah was given at Mt. Sinai.

According to the Talmud and the Midrash,² the first recitation of this famous one-line occurred years before and is hinted at in this week's Torah reading.

4. Parshat Vayechi

Our portion is called *Vayechi*, from its first word meaning "And lived..." which shares its root with the word *chai*, meaning "life."

*And lived Jacob in the land of Egypt for seventeen years...*³

At this point, the Torah relates the final hours of Jacob's life here on earth. Picture the scene: our ancestors, the twelve sons of Jacob who will become the Twelve Tribes of Israel, gather around their father as he lies on his deathbed. Says Jacob:

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4.

² Bereishit Rabba 98:4; Devarim Rabbah 2:35. See also Pesachim 56a for a different recounting.

³ Genesis 47:28.

“Gather and listen, sons of Jacob, and listen to Israel, your father.”⁴

Why the double expression, 1) *Gather and listen, sons of Jacob*, 2) *and listen to Israel, your father*? The Midrash expounds upon this to set the scene of Jacob’s final moments:

When Jacob was in his final hour, he beckoned the twelve tribes to his bedside and said: “Listen, the Lord of Israel in the heavens is your Father; perhaps you are divisive in your hearts regarding God?” To which they replied: “Hear, O Israel, our father, just as you do not have divisiveness in your heart, we do not have divisiveness in our hearts – the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”⁵

To which Jacob replied: “Blessed be His glorified Name forever and ever.”

This is why the Jewish people rise in the morning and settle at night by proclaiming: “Hear, O Israel, our father who rests in the Cave [of Machpelah]: that which you have taught us back then is still with us today – the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

Try to imagine, if you can, how Jacob must have felt as his soul was preparing to leave his body. Jacob was then in Egypt, the epitome of darkness. He knew that his children would be in Egypt for the foreseeable future, and the darkness would not get lighter anytime soon. Jacob was concerned that perhaps, in this darkness, his children will become divisive in their hearts, questioning the oneness and unity of God?

To which they responded: “Hear O Israel, our father, just as you know that the Lord is our God, the Lord is One, so too, do we know that the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

And then the highly relieved Jacob uttered the immortal words: *Baruch Shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed* – “Blessed be His glorified Name forever and ever.”

⁴ Genesis 49:2.

⁵ Bereishit Rabba 98:4.

5. Ingrained in a Jew's Soul (First Story)

During World War Two, countless Jewish parents gave their precious children to Christian neighbors and orphanages in the hope that they would provide safe havens for them. Of course, the parents expected that they would take these children back if they survived the war. The few parents who did not perish in the Holocaust and were able to reclaim their children often faced another horror. While the parents had fought to survive the slave labor and death camps, or had hidden out for years, those who took their children were busy teaching them the ways of other religions.

Additionally, many Jewish children who were taken in by orphanages, convents and the like, had no parents or close relatives left after the Holocaust. When rabbis or distant relatives finally tracked down many of these children, the priests and nuns who had been their caretakers insisted that no children from Jewish homes were in their institutions. Thus, countless Jewish children were not only stripped of their entire families, they were also stripped of their Jewish identities.

In May, 1945, Rabbi Eliezer Silver from the United States and Dayan Grunfeld from England were sent as chaplains with the Allied armed forces who were liberating some of the death camps. While passing through Alsace-Lorraine, they were told that many Jewish children had been placed in a local monastery. The rabbis went there to reclaim them.

When they approached the priest in charge, they asked that the Jewish children be released into their care. "I'm sorry," the priest responded, "but there is no way of knowing which children here came from Jewish families. You must have documentation if you wish me to do what you ask."

Of course, the kind of documentation that the priest wanted was unobtainable at the end of the war. The rabbis asked to see the list of names of children who were in the monastery. As the rabbis read the list, they pointed to those that belonged to Jewish children.

"I'm sorry," the priest insisted, "but these names could be either Jewish or Gentile. Miller is a German name, and Markovich is a Russian name, and Swersky is a Polish name. You can't prove that these are Jewish children. Since you can't prove which children are Jewish, you have to leave."

And then one of the rabbis had a brilliant idea. "We'd like to come back again this evening when you are putting the children to sleep."

The priest reluctantly agreed.

That evening the rabbis came to the dormitory, where row upon row of little beds were arranged. The children, many of whom had been in the monastery since the war started in 1939, were going to sleep. The rabbis walked through the aisles of beds, calling out, "*Shema Yisrael!*" as, one by one, the Jewish children burst into tears and cried out, "Mommy!" "Maman!" "Momma!" "Mamushka!" in their native tongues.

The priest had succeeded in teaching these precious Jewish souls about the Trinity, the New Testament, and the Christian savior. Each child knew how to respond to prayers during Mass. But the priest did not succeed in erasing these children's memories, etched in their minds, hearts and souls, of their Jewish mothers putting them to bed every night with the *Shema* on their lips.⁶

6. Shema and Motorcycles? (Second Story)

Every Sunday morning, a certain rabbi would study Torah with two Jewish surgeons. While they were discussing the topic of the *Shema*, one of the surgeons shared a most incredible story:

One morning, while driving to work, he decided to take a route that he doesn't normally drive. As he pulled up to a red light prior to entering onto the highway, he looked out his window and noticed a motorcyclist

⁶ Adapted from <http://www.torahtots.com/holocaust/stories.htm>.

stopped next to him. The motorcyclist was dressed in black from head to toe, riding a sleek black Italian motorcycle. The light then turned green and the motorcycle sped off.

The doctor continued on the highway for a short stretch and suddenly saw the Italian motorcycle spinning across the highway on its side with sparks shooting everywhere. The motorcyclist had lost control and was thrown from the bike. The doctor quickly pulled over and ran to the man. He was lying on the ground, still wearing his black helmet, and missing one of his legs. Arterial blood was pouring from his thigh; he was bleeding to death.

A woman passer-by stopped to assist the doctor in saving the biker's life. The doctor turned to her and realized it was one of the nurses from his hospital. She was running very late for work that morning and happened to pass by at the exact time of the accident.

The doctor realized that in another 60 seconds the man would hemorrhage to death. He quickly placed his lab coat on the man's artery and pressed with all his strength. As the doctor was trying to stanch the bleeding, the man lifted his hand to his helmet and began slowly pulling it off.

"I had no idea what to expect when I saw him removing his helmet. I expected to hear groaning, cries or perhaps screaming. I was shocked and couldn't believe my ears when I heard him saying the words, '*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad!*'"

The doctor managed to control the bleeding until an emergency medical team arrived and rushed the man to the nearest trauma hospital. He did not recognize the motorcyclist at the time but, as it turns out, they attended the same synagogue.

On Rosh Hashanah of the following year there was a knock on the doctor's door. He opened the door and immediately recognized the face of the motorcyclist standing there with his children beside him. He said, "I just wanted to thank you for saving my life."

When the doctor finished telling this story the room was completely silent. Then he turned to the rabbi he was learning with and said, "This is what I think about when I say the words *Shema Yisrael*."

It then dawned on the rabbi that we are all like this motorcyclist riding down the open highway. Maybe it's not a physical motorcycle but, as we travel down the highway of our own personal lives, we all have "accidents." We all hit bumps in the road that may throw us off course – sometimes in the form of overwhelming, life-altering trials related to health, finances, or family, and sometimes in the form of the small aches and pains of living. That's when our belief in God hits the pavement, and we can gage how real we are when we say *Shema Yisrael* and proclaim God's unity – thereby acknowledging the divine orchestration of events, the blessings hidden within.

Whether it's a motorcycle accident or challenge in the office or home, or a celebration of good fortune, we cover our eyes with our hands, regardless of what is in front of us today, and declare, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One."⁷

7. Hero Israel, Today (Conclusion)

This, says the Midrash, is why the Jews merit reciting the *Shema* every morning and every evening: In the darkness and idolatry of Egypt, in a land divisive and antithetical to Divine unity, they never forgot their driving philosophy of life.

Here we are, 3,520 years later, and we still rise every morning and go to bed every night with these words on our lips. This is our bumper sticker, embedded into our hearts and souls.

When the question arises if perhaps we are divisive in our hearts, or we think differently than our father Jacob – we respond as his sons did: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One!"

⁷ Adapted from a story related by Rabbi Tzvi Sytner, <http://www.aish.com/sp/pr/Shema-Yisrael--the-Motorcyclist.html>.

This past calendar year, 2014, was a difficult one on many levels. With the attacks on Israel the land and on Israel the nation throughout the world, with the rise of ISIS and other enemies, the world can seem very divisive. With our holy brothers being slaughtered in synagogues and jetliners full of people literally falling off the radar, life can seem very fragmented indeed.

To this we say: “Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

And, when our father Jacob, Israel, hears this, he is at peace and responds: “Blessed be His glorified Name forever and ever.”

Let us commit to recite, with even deeper passion, the Shema every morning and every evening. Designate special time to recite it with your children. What a beautiful way to wake up each morning and go to sleep at night – with words that have been recited since almost the beginning of time. Words that have kept us going, in an unbroken chain, for millennia.

Words that allow us to make sense of our chaotic world. Words that define our purpose, our calling and driving ethos.

And let me leave you with one more final thought:

If life were a highway, and our bodies the vehicles that our souls drive along the asphalt, our soul’s bumper sticker would read: “Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.”

And the world would respond: “Blessed be His glorified Name forever and ever.”

This gives us strength and through this may we be strengthened.

Chazak Chazak V’nitchazek!

Shabbat Shalom!