

Sermon for Ekev 5778
Thoughts on V'haya Im Shamo'a

I grew up the Reform movement and became a Conservative Jew as an adult. So imagine my surprise to discover upon moving from one kind of Jewish community to another that the traditional recitation of the Shema includes another whole paragraph or two that I was not used reading. The passage in question is the middle section of the Shema, which is known by its first words, 'V'haya im shamo'a.' That section is taken from this week's Torah portion, Ekev, and it raises important questions for how we understand our relationship with God and how we approach the Shema as a tool of prayer.

V'haya im shamo'a makes the claim that cause and effect are in operation in this world. It says that if we obey God's commands we will be rewarded, and that if we ignore them we will be punished. The rewards that are specifically mentioned include rain in its proper season and crops that grow as they should. The punishments are just the opposite. In the traditional liturgy, this is the second of the Shema's three sections, following the paragraph in which we acknowledge God as our god, and just before God's promises of redemption. Its position between those two ideas is purposeful: If we acknowledge God as creator, and God's demands as binding, we then have to accept the cause and effect that are then implied, and if we observe those commands, we will be redeemed.

The problem is that most people don't believe it. That is why the Reform movement, consistent with its ideals, removed this section from the Shema from the liturgy. After all, if you don't believe something, why should you constantly recite it? But that is not the only way to approach a difficult text. In the Conservative movement, the emphasis is on conserving (thus the name) traditional texts and practices, while reinterpreting, or reimagining what they can mean for

us today. In fact that has been the way rabbinic Judaism has always worked. Texts are never merely what their words say; they are what our tradition, and what we ourselves, bring to them. How we read them is just as important as the words themselves.

So let me provide one possible reading of this section of Torah; many others are possible. God has commanded us, among many other things, to be the stewards of the world we have been given, to care and tend for it. If we respond to that command, keeping our land, water and air clean and usable, we will be rewarded with them functioning properly and, as this section says, the rain will fall in the proper amounts and at the proper time. If we continue to poison the land, water and air, we will irrevocably damage the ecosystem. Now the Torah phrases that as God punishing us, but we can just as easily understand the punishment as being built into the way the world naturally functions. That is one example, but the same holds true in a variety of settings. If we refuse to lead lives of righteousness, our actions will come back to haunt us. If we cheat and steal we will be punished; if we help others and live righteously, we will reap the rewards. Perhaps reward and punishments are not as direct and immediate as the Torah states, but we can put that down to hyperbole on its part.

By thinking deeply about sacred texts, whether in the Tanakh or in the siddur, we infuse them with new meanings that allow us to continue to live by them and to pray them. Rather than jettisoning uncomfortable texts, or insisting on holding onto interpretations of texts that no longer hold any meaning for us, or even repel us, the Conservative movement has always insisted on conserving tradition while simultaneously re-imagining it. We don't have to believe or behave exactly as our ancestors did, but we impoverish ourselves when we too quickly and easily leave their ideas and practices behind. A balanced approach permits us to retain our

connection to the past while constantly moving into the future. As the second section of the Shema teaches us, there is something like cause and effect in this world. We should listen to that lesson daily, and try to create the kind of outcomes that will bring peace, love and learning into the world.

Shabbat shalom.

And now I want to do something completely different. Building on the words I have just shared with you, I would like us to engage in five minutes of discussion on the theme of difficult ideas and texts in our tradition. What are the parts of Jewish tradition that, upon first glance, or even upon multiple readings, leave us uncomfortable? How do we conserve those texts as sacred parts of our tradition, without feeling that we must understand them in the same way they were read two thousand years ago? If you have trouble coming up with examples, I have a whole list here: The Akedah (the binding of Isaac for sacrifice by Abraham); Shimon and Levi killing all of the men of Shechem after one of the Shechemites assaulted their sister Dinah; the command to kill all of the Amalekites, including all boys and girls over the age of puberty; God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart...need I go on? What about the lengthy sections on sacrifice which, even if they do not offend because they record long lost practices, must be read in their entirety each year?