

Why Does the *Shema* Keep Changing? Or Does It?

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No matter what your opinion of tonight's prayer book, *Mishkan T'filah*, everybody has one. Still, none can fail to be moved when we find the *Shema*, the watchword of our faith, on one two-page spread. This stunning presentation highlights the singular importance of this declaration of our faith. The Hebrew is typeset in blue, with lettering as it is found in the Torah. After all, the *Shema* is a verse of Torah, Deuteronomy 6:4, from this week's portion.

Underneath, we find a translation of the *Shema*. As those who have been around Reform Judaism a long time know, perhaps all too well, the rabbis who prepare our Reform prayer books are forever changing the English wording of our most oft-repeated and dearly beloved prayer.

In my lifetime, and in the lifetime of anybody my age or older, or even a little younger, we Reform Jews have prayed from up to five different prayer books. The *Union Prayer Book* reigned from the 19th Century until it was replaced by *Gates of Prayer* in 1975. In the 1990s, many of us came to know a slim volume, never intended as more than an interim prayer book, usually referred to as "Gates of Gray." Now, we worship some weeks from *Mishkan T'filah* and others from *Union Prayer Book – Sinai Edition*. Each of these prayer books has offered a different translation of the *Shema*. *Sinai UPB* gives us two choices each time the *Shema* occurs.

Of course, nobody really changed the *Shema*. The six Hebrew words are the same inscribed in the Torah scroll itself: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. Those are the first Hebrew words most of us ever learn. We know what the sentence means, even if the translation has changed. *Adonai* is the one and only God.

Or do we know?

Union Prayer Book adopted the translation of the old Jewish Publication Society's Holy Scriptures: "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." As a child, I thought the words awkward. When *Gates of Prayer* emerged, adding one English word, "is," the translation was easier to understand: "Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God; the Lord is one."

But how many "is's" are actually in the *Shema*, in Hebrew? Which translation is accurate?

Sorry, I can't answer that and that's not because I'm unsure of the meaning of the word "is," even now that I live in Arkansas. Instead, translators sometimes have a hard time deciding where to put a word like "is," because there is no such word in Hebrew. If I were to translate the Hebrew word-for-word, it would be, "Hear, Israel, Adonai, our God, Adonai, one." That's just plain bad English. We need to insert the word "is" at least once. Some of you have heard me say, "Every translation is an interpretation." Never is one and only one translation a correct rendition of a sentence from one language into another. In this case, we must interpret, at least deciding where to put the word "is," if we are to translate into correct English.

If the word "is" appears only once, the *Shema* is one sentence. The rest of it simply introduces the part that makes it a sentence: *Adonai Echad*, "the Lord is one." One could say that it's also one sentence in the Torah, in Hebrew. Moreover, listen to how the *Shema* is chanted: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. The major break comes after the first two words, "Hear, Israel." "The Lord our God" and "The Lord is one" have a less significant pause between them. If something like a semi-colon

were intended between these two elements, the Shema would be chanted like this: *Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*. I hope you hear the difference, despite my singing voice.

The Torah itself lacks punctuation altogether. The marks that symbolize the chanting and pausing were added a mere 1500 years ago, give or take. Therefore, the scholarly translators who added a second “is” were not renegades. Their goal, in preparing the New Jewish Publication Society Translation was to produce a more readable English Bible.

Now, the Shema would have two sentences; Israel is told to hear two messages: First, “*Adonai* is our God.” Second, “*Adonai* is one.” But let’s go back to that first sentence: Is it *Adonai* is **our** God; or ***Adonai*** is our God? *Oy vey!* The translation, already an interpretation, is open to interpretation.

Thankfully, this dilemma has a likely answer. The sentence almost certainly means ***Adonai*** is our God. In other words, this particular God, *Adonai*, and not some other, is the God we serve. In the days of the Torah, many different gods were worshiped by different people. The one God worshiped by Israel was and remains *Adonai*, or in English, “the Lord.”

1975 came and went. Ten minutes after Gates of Prayer was published, Reform Jews increasingly became concerned about gender equality. God’s gender became a significant prayer book issue, particularly in English. If God, the ultimate source of power, is male, perhaps the historic reality of men’s authority over women is legitimate.

Now, of course, Jews have never believed that God has a male or female body. However, in Hebrew, as with most languages other than English, every noun has a gender. “God” is a masculine word, even if God isn’t a male. Unable to repair the Hebrew, rabbis and laity increasingly sought to eliminate use of words like “he” or “him” to refer to God in English. Clearly, no such language would be found in the next Reform prayer book; and it isn’t in either of the two we use now.

Well, the *Shema* has no pronoun, so there’s no problem of “he” or “his” on that page. However, for many people, including the folks who published the prayer book, the word “Lord” is considered to be masculine. Technically, of course, that’s correct. So, “Gates of Gray” replaced the term “Lord” with “the Eternal.”

Yes, every translation is an interpretation, but some interpretations are more faithful than others. Admittedly, translating that particular word of the *Shema* is tough. We say *Adonai*, but truth be told, that’s not the word written in Hebrew. Instead, Hebrew readers see four Hebrew letters, the ancient proper name of God. That four-lettered name was pronounced only by the High Priest, only on Yom Kippur, only in the Holy of Holies. Some speculate that it was pronounced Yahweh, but that’s a guess at best. Since none of us is the High Priest, and the Holy of Holies was destroyed 2000 years ago, we’re not supposed to pronounce those four consonants anyway. Instead, in Hebrew, we say *Adonai*. That means “Lord,” literally translated, but it also stands for God’s name. “The Eternal” doesn’t sound anything like a name.

Even worse is the way that little gray prayer book rendered the end of the Shema. “Hear O Israel, the Eternal is our God, the Eternal alone.” The last word of the Shema is *Echad*. That translates directly as the number “one.” Every translation is an interpretation, but not every interpretation is a translation. The phrase, “the Eternal alone” is an interpretation of the phrase *Adonai Echad*, not a translation.

The worst thing about this third translation of the Shema is that it's so different from every translation that preceded it. No, the English isn't in the Torah. And yet, we recite the Shema so frequently that even the English rendition becomes sacred to us. Even the addition of a second "is" was disconcerting to many. To this day, when praying at the bedside of an ill Temple member whose formative experiences were with the *Union Prayer Book*, the translation remains, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." We should not be shackled by the past. And yet, faithfulness to our Reform heritage ought at least to be a consideration.

As for *Mishkan T'filah*, I rather like its translation solution.

"Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one."

It's still two sentences, emphasizing both that we worship Adonai and that God is one.

The name for God is the one that Jews have used, in Hebrew, for two millennia. No attempt is made to translate a name that can't be translated. Interpretation is kept to a minimum.

One day, Reform congregations will be filled with men and women, all of whom read Hebrew and understand at least some key words. Perhaps then, no translation of the *Shema* will be required. Until that time, or at least until the next prayer book is published, after I retire, we have a translation that can inspire us.

And let us all remember: No matter how we translate it, the words and the deepest meaning will always be the same, every time we affirm our faith together, saying: *Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*.

Amen.