

## Rel 402, Judaism - the Shema

### The Shema and Grace After Meals

After completing the reading assignment on Judaism, I was trying to decide what spiritual aid to choose for my essay. I know how impressed I was with the devotion that was given to prayer, so I decided that I wanted to include some sort of prayer with my assignment. I chose the Shema because it is Judaism's oldest daily prayer.

I read that the Shema included only three scriptures. I figured that reciting those three scriptures twice a day would be too easy, so I decided that I would also recite the Birkat HaMazon or "Grace After Meals" prayer for the three days; not realizing that it was a fairly complicated prayer. I had a difficult time locating a complete English translation of the Birkat HaMazon, so I only used the first portion of the prayer, as it was easiest to locate and understand. Even though I only had this partial translation, the prayer was still pretty long; about five paragraphs with at least eight sentences each.

I was probably ten years old when I first began attending church. While I did memorize the Lord's Prayer, my experience with prayer has been more like having a conversation with God rather than the reciting of a specific scripture, so this was a little different from what I was accustomed to. I read that in Judaism, prayers are to be genuine and sincere. This was difficult for me to accomplish because I was trying to read the specific prayers; it didn't seem heartfelt to me because it wasn't a conversation, but more like a reading assignment. I did take the time out of my day, but I would have much rather enjoyed speaking from the heart rather than reading a scripture passage.

The Shema consists of three scriptures. Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4-9, speaks of the love that one should have for the Lord; that He should always be on our minds and we are to speak of Him often. He is to be in our every movement and should never be forgotten. Deuteronomy chapter 11 verses 13-21, says much the same as chapter 6, but also mentions that if we do what is asked of us, we will gain rewards. It also warns us not to turn away from God, or there will be consequences. The last part of the Shema is found in Numbers, chapter 15 verses 37-41, which states that we are to make tassels on our clothes as a way to remember God's commandments and to remind us of the Exodus from Egypt. These three scriptures (the Shema) are to be recited in the morning and again in the evening.

The Birkat HaMazon or "Grace After Meals" prayer was nothing at all like what I was expecting. I guess I was expecting something similar to what "saying Grace" is in the Christian religion, being thankful for the food that was received. It is nothing like that. In fact, it has absolutely nothing to do with being thankful for food at all. It is more of a continuous praising of God and His glory. It's beautiful, actually. I really love it that any time I went anywhere on the internet to read about Judaism, I noticed that when they write His name, they don't spell it out fully . . . His name is too holy to spell out, (much like when His name was too holy to speak aloud in assignment 2). It is always spelled G-d or L-rd. At first I thought it was a little strange, but now I think that it is just beautiful; so respectful!

As I stated in my first essay, I feel that I have become distrustful towards organized religion. I feel that this mistrust has damaged my outlook on religion as a whole. By setting time aside to do this assignment, I have opened myself up to experience spirituality again. After the first day, it didn't feel like I was setting time aside to do an assignment; it felt like I was setting time aside to spend time with Him, (more so with the Shema prayer than with the Grace After Meals prayer). Maybe it's a good thing that the first religion that we were to do an essay on was Judaism. I mean, even though I'm not Jewish, it is the same God that I am familiar with. He is the same God that I've had a relationship with since I was very young. I already know Him and believe in Him. Maybe that made me comfortable enough to enjoy the experience. We will have to see what kind of reaction future reflection essays will bring.

When I was reading about Judaism, I remembered a man I used to know, probably twenty years ago. He was a Jewish man and we would have conversations about our respective religions. He believed that Christ was a holy man, but not the Son of God. I remember him saying that like it was yesterday. I remember seeing symbols and Hebrew writings in his house. I remember being a little intimidated by that, although I'm not sure why. I guess because I didn't really know much about it, or because I may have felt that he was more educated about his religion than I was about mine. I really wish I had asked more questions. It's fascinating to me now.

All in all, this experience was a positive one. I do believe that prayer should be more casual, but anyone who was raised to do things differently would argue that their way is the best way for them. I think that one should speak to God as one would to a loved one . . . because that is what He is. I can see that Judaism is repetitive and ceremonial, and I think that it is respectful. The adoration that is given to God in this specific religion is so commendable. I admire the devotion that this religion demands.