

## Shema

What does God call us to? Both Moses and Jesus give the same response: the ancient Jewish call to worship—the *Shema*

Hear O Israel!  
The Lord your God is God alone.  
You shall love the Lord your God  
with all your heart  
with all your soul  
with all your mind  
and with all your strength

To which Jesus adds in the same breath its human flipside,  
love your neighbor as yourself.

What would it mean to love God so completely? The temptation is to fear that it means hacking away anything and everything that is not of God in our lives. To fear that loving God would mean denying ourselves, cutting away those parts of ourselves that we are ashamed of yet seem to cling to, unable to let go of. The temptation is to think that the call of the Shema is so impossibly hard, its futile to even try.

I have found the Jewish Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber very helpful here. He argues that we must not think of evil as an independent thing, for after all everything has been created by God, and God himself has called his creation good. Rather he talks of evil as “the lowest rung of the fully good” as a power that leads us astray, but that only needs the direction towards God to become good. Evil is the thornbush which, seized by the divine fire, becomes the revelation of God. We must let the thornbush be entirely penetrated by the fire. We must join to God the desire of the temptation itself, uplifting the love of the creature and its beauty to become transformed into a love for the source of all creatures and all beauty, a love of the source that makes all beauty beautiful and so brings love home from its exile. We must lift the fear that seizes us before a force clothed in human or cosmic might into a fear of the Lord God Almighty himself, a fear redeemed and transformed into awe and reverence. We must forge the glowing mass of our rage into zeal for God. We must transform the pleasures of this earth into the splendor of heaven.

In this sense then, to love God does not mean to deny oneself or forsake the world, but

rather to recognize that we and the world too are God's and to act accordingly. To love God with all our hearts does not mean to deny the desires of our heart but to treat all our feelings, not just those we are proud of but all our feelings, however garbled, twisted and confused by a lifetime of pain and neglect, but to treat all of them as somehow, in some way, expressing a yearning for God. It would mean that to turn a deaf ear to any of them would be to turn away from the fullness of what God is calling us to, that all our feelings have something important to teach us, something important to contribute to who we are, if we can but be patient and attentive with ourselves. It would mean that the task of holiness is not to deny and discard what is not worthy of God but to offer our whole heart to God's healing grace.

What would it mean to love God with all our soul? It would mean to resist the temptation to banish the awkward and inept parts of ourselves from ourselves. It would mean resisting the temptation to keep hidden and locked in a closet those parts of ourselves that we feel guilty about, those parts of ourselves soul that still act like spoiled or neglected children, craving attention, or quick to throw temper tantrums. It would mean to work at reconciling those parts of ourselves with the rest of us. It would mean to use the more mature parts of ourselves not merely to scold and to punish, but to guide and to school, to raise and to nurture those parts of ourselves that for one reason or another we have spoiled and neglected.

And what would it mean to love God with all our mind? It would mean to seek to understand all things as part of God's creation and plan for us. In particular it would mean to allow our faith to mature from the faith of our childhood-- to resist the temptation to protect our faith from all that we have learned in life since we were children. It would mean to resist the fear that to question anything that we have ever been taught about God or his Church would be to threaten our faith in all of it, as if our faith needs to remain the faith of an unquestioning child, as if religious faith really were as fragile as we sometimes treat it. It would mean to quit patronizing ourselves, and become adults in the Christian community.

What would it mean to love God with all our strength? It would mean to resist the temptation to segregate our lives into two parts, one religious, for Sunday or at home, and one profane, at work or with friends. Not to act like we are always at Church but to bring our working self to Church, and our religious self to work. It would mean to treat all our powers, not only what we are told are our spiritual gifts, but all our powers, even the most sensual, as gifts from God, as revelations of God's goodness.

How is such a total devotion possible? Only through attending with equal care to the flipside, to loving our neighbor not as we actually love ourselves, for we usually treat ourselves pretty shabily, but as we would want to be loved by someone, as we hope to be loved by God. For it is often easier to learn how to love those shameful parts of ourselves by practicing our love on others who stumble in way that remind us of ourselves.

In short Moses and Jesus are both teaching us that we can only be holy if we are whole, and we can only be whole if we treat every part of us as holy, as yearning and seeking for the Holy One. God calls upon us to revere not revile our hearts, understand not condemn our thoughts, school not deny our strength. For we are God's and who are we to condemn the work of his hands, even if it be our own very soul?