

Talking to God: The Shmah and Amidah

I'd like to share some bits and pieces of interpretation of the Shmah and Amidah that I've picked up from various sources.

As I understand it, davening is about entering into a relationship with God. The three paragraphs of the Shmah are from the Torah – that is – from the speech of God. So in the Shmah, God speaks to us. That is also the form it takes – God speaks to us in first person - אשר אנוכי מצוך היום [that I command you today].

In the Amidah, we speak to God – and so we say: ברוך אתה [Blessed are You].

The purpose of this communication between us and God is laid out in the third paragraph of the Shmah – והייתם קדושים לאלוקיכם [and you will be holy to Your God] – קדושים [holy] – like הרי את מקודשת לי [behold you are betrothed to me], as when man and woman enter into marriage and as in אשר קידשנו במצוותיו [He has sanctified us through His Commandments] when God betroths us through the Mitsvot.

This is the aim: to enter into a marriage-like relationship with God. And in the Shmah God also lays out what we need to do: we have to construct ourselves. Shmah Yisrael, the first line, is God's call to get the construction going. Then, we have to construct our right arm – so as to embrace God – the right arm being associated with hesed, that is, pure love. And that's the first paragraph of the shmah: its says ואהבת את ה' אלוקיך [Love the Lord Your God]– its in the singular, a call from God to the pray-er alone, and it asks only for love, no reward, no punishment.

Then we have to construct our left arm. The left side is associated with din, that is, lawfulness, and this is the second paragraph of the Shmah that talks about reward and

punishment, good and bad. If we pursue the good it says: ונתתי מטר ארצכם בעתו - and I will give you “matar” [rain] in its time. Water being a symbol of divine shefa [emanation], of life and spirit. And it includes the punishments as well – ולא יהיה מטר : I will cut off your life and spirit. Thus it is associated with din, judgment/lawfulness, the left side. Notice also that its in the plural: it speaks to the prayer as part of the community.

Creating our right and left arms through the first and second paragraphs of the shmah enables the female aspect of God to say in the song of Solomon שמאלו תחת ראשי וימינו תחבקיני [His left arm is under my head and his right arm embraces me]. This is the state of being קדושים לה' אלוקיכם [holy to the Lord your God]. Thus we are holy to - married to - God.

In the amidah we respond to God. In the first two brachot [blessings], we sort of talk existentially about what God means to us. We tell God that He or She is our shield, the object of our love, the source of our life, the cause of our death, and the hope of our redemption, among many other things.

And then we state our aspiration of being the kind of people who could enter into a the relationship that we're after with God. We declare our will to be קדושים [holy] that בכל יום יהללוך [praise You every day]. And then we ask for things which represent the aligning of our finite wills with God's infinite will. Just as Shlomo asked for wisdom, so do we. And we ask for tshuvah, forgiveness, redemption, healing, fecundity, ingathering, justice and so forth. These are things that we should want, and that if we were capable, we should want to give. When we *will* these things, and thus align our wills with the Divine Will, we are capable of drawing close to God.

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