

The *SHEKHINAH SH'MA*:

Six Little Words to Shake the World

ARIADNE JOY LIEBER, PH.D., tells RABBI SUSAN SCHNUR *why she's revising Judaism's central prayer*

“LISTEN, ISRAEL,
THE SHEKHINAH IS IN OUR INMOST BEING
[IS AMONG US], THE SHEKHINAH IS ONE”

*Sh'ma Yisrael,
ha-Shekhinah b'Kirbainu ha-Shekhinah Ahat*

SUSAN SCHNUR: Ariadne, so this Shekhinah Sh'ma popped into your mind full-blown?

ARIADNE LIEBER: Yes. I was praying, and I often pray feeling half-alienated. Here's the traditional Sh'ma: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Blessed be His glorious kingdom forever and ever." Ichhh.... The words "Lord," "His," "glorious kingdom"—I don't relate to lords and kingdoms. Spiritually, this isn't what I need to say. For goodness sake, it's the 21st century.

SCHNUR: Your doctoral dissertation was on the motif of joy in biblical prophecies, and you're a spiritual intuitive. This makes you an interesting pray-er. Can you walk us through these six little words?

LIEBER: Well, the first two words are unchanged—"*Sh'ma Yisrael*"—but I certainly don't think of translating them as "Hear, O Israel," which is the traditional rendering. That has an administrative sound to me and feels patronizing and anti-me. "Listen, Israel" is much stronger, more open, it's not somebody trying to tell you—trying to tell the one who's praying—what to do. It's a process; listening is deep. It's active. "Listen" means "Stop for a moment. Become absorbed in this." The pray-er

will come up with something. "Listen"—I'm getting my own attention here.

SCHNUR: Paying attention is a spiritual act. It's like that magnificent Denise Levertov poem about marriage. One partner says to the other, "You have my attention"—what an exquisite thing to say to the one you love. "You have my attention: which is a tenderness, beyond what I may say." I've done wedding ceremonies where I adapt this poem into nuptial vows.

LIEBER: "Listen, Israel" is also someone else talking to the ancient Israelites, myself among them. It's the eternal me, the big me. It's Everyjew. It's Frankie's "the we of me" from *Member of the Wedding*.

SCHNUR: And Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes...."

LIEBER: Right. Embracing everything. "*Sh'ma Yisrael*" is an invitation: "Okay, I'm listening, I'm excited. What do you have to say?"

SCHNUR: Well, the next two words: "*Ha-Shekhinah b'kirbainu*"—that God's presence or indwelling is in our inmost being, is among us.

LIEBER: Yes. The Shekhinah is a female naming of God, it's the term for divine immanence; that is, the God within us, circulating all around us, the God in everything. It's not the God over us, it's not that Lord God on a throne.

SCHNUR: The Shekhinah dwells *with* us.

LIEBER: I don't like the word "God." It's a dry word. It's cold. It doesn't do anything for me. It has a masculine sound in my ear. *Gott*. Sort of military. A choppy, cut sound. To be honest, it repels me. Shekhinah takes me further, to a different place. Shekhinah is a spirit, not an image. It's a feeling of divinity all around you. A presence you can't deny, an indwelling. In Chinese, it's your Qi [pronounced "chee"]. And I like "the" Shekhinah—it's an honorific that includes us.

SCHNUR: How are you with "the Lord our God"—*Adonai Elohainu*—in the original Sh'ma?

LIEBER: It's so distant. It's out there. Where is this guy? Who cares? There's nothing personal about "the Lord our God." It doesn't locate godliness. Somebody outside of us—a male, maybe Moses—is ordering us ("Hear, O Israel!") to hear that the Lord is our God. Ughh. It's unilateral, uni-directional. My "Listen, Israel" is very internal, it's preparing us for something beautiful, something whispered and inclusive and complete, something so holy.

SCHNUR: It's a mean and frightening world out there, a mutilated world. It's imperative that humanity locates the divine within itself.

LIEBER: Within Herself. Now we come to the fourth word, the fulcrum word: "b'kirbainu"—within us, among us, in our midst, in our inmost being. Wow. We're expressing this to each other. "Hey, it's within us!" It's a revelation. No one told us this before, that it's within us. At Sinai, they made a mistake. They really wanted to see a God. I think the word "*b'kirbainu*" came to me from the prophet Zephaniah: "God is in the midst of thee" is the standard translation [Zephaniah 3:17].

SCHNUR: But Zephaniah goes on to call God the "Mighty One who will save."

LIEBER: Whoa. That does not at all take us where we want to go! We need Oneness, not a One that's Other, who "saves us" from outside of us, who is a separate entity. We're part of the One. I don't want a God who's making something out there, who "forms light and darkness"—a God outside. I am part of God. I don't care if God is male or female, or male *and* female, what I care about is that I am part of God.

SCHNUR: I need to go back to the uni-directional God for a moment, to the God who has a unilateral relationship with us. What if our relationship with that God were really reciprocal—if that God gets changed by our commitment, by our listening? If listening makes us equal? I need to quote the whole Levertov poem, to re-title it "Sh'ma":

You have my
attention: which is
a tenderness, beyond
what I may say. And I have
your constancy to
something beyond myself.
The force
of your commitment charges us—we live
in the sweep of it, taking courage
one from the other.

LIEBER: Oh, the idea of God taking courage from us is just amazing. There is no God without us; God needs us. When I was working on my dissertation, I found that the biblical God didn't always know what God was supposed to do. In the book of Exodus, God needs Moses' help to find His/Her position. We're still watching the process of God's growth and development, of God's maturation. It hasn't ended. My Sh'ma certainly doesn't declare that God is complete.

SCHNUR: But the last word there—*Abat*—certainly feels summative.

LIEBER: Yes, this is the word that started the Shekhinah Sh'ma for me. It's the feminine form of the word "one." "The Shekhinah is One." And what's wonderful about it, as compared to the masculine form of the word, is that it starts with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet and ends with the last letter of the alphabet. When I first realized this, while sitting in the library, I was beaming. I'm still beaming!

SCHNUR: It makes you happy.

LIEBER: In the library, I was like a holy fool, a *meshugeneh*, talking to myself and the holy Hebrew letters. We are the beginning and the end. No matter what you do, it comes back to a beginning and an end. *Abat* ties up the package, the doxology. And this alpha-to-omega word, in the feminine, happens to mean "one." And we run all over the place shouting these words: We teach them to our children, and bind them upon our arms and heads, and write them on our doorposts. We put them everywhere so we don't forget.

SCHNUR: "Listen, Israel, the Shekhinah is in our inmost being [is among us], the Shekhinah is One."

LIEBER: Yes. I don't want the traditional Sh'ma, the traditional declaration of faith, posted everywhere. It takes our freedom away; it's belittling. It severs us from ourselves. Women don't want a big God up over us. The Shekhinah Sh'ma meets women where they already naturally are: in dialogue, in reciprocity, in inclusive and eternal oneness. This Sh'ma affirms what's already ours: the prayer within.

SCHNUR: The inside/outside/everything/the earth/all of it.

LIEBER: The "aleph" to "tof"—the A to Z. The One. ■