

This past Shabbat we were reviewing some of the Midrashim related to Jacob's deathbed blessing of his children. One of the biggest sources of a few of the Midrashim is part of the play on words that Hebrew allows - vowels are added to the letters, and often the same set of letters mean two different words - and this week, the English equivalents are "to" and "God". Before beginning the blessings directed at the children, he says, "Listen, you all, to/God Israel/of Israel your father."

On the simplest level, the sentence reads, "Listen to Israel your father." On the pun level, it is, "Listen you all, the God of Israel is your father." On the expanded level, "Listen, all of you, the God of Israel is as singular as your father." Which is to say that Jacob hoped that unlike all previous generations, that his children would have only the God of Abraham and Isaac in their minds as the God to worship.

According to the Midrash, the children all responded, "Listen, Israel [our father] Adonai is indeed our God, and only Adonai." At which point, Jacob relaxed a bit and metaphorically murmured "Thank God" before getting to the point. The Midrash is a bit more specific about the words he used, however. Jacob is reported to have murmured "The reputation of Adonai's glorious kingdom is now clearly eternally blessed."

The Midrash continues to let us know that this statement of the children is why we have the opportunity to recite the Shema two to three times each day, so that Jacob can continue to recite his response, "Baruch Sheim K'vod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed." This extension of the Midrash is the basis for the difference of opinion concerning the response line of the Shema. Why do some people recite this line quietly? There are several possibilities: 1) as a reminder that this line is not part of the original Torah text; 2) as a reminder that Midrashically this line belongs to Jacob; 3) As a clear indication that not everyone agreed that we should include it in the first place (so as a compromise we put it in but only say it out loud once during the year); 4) while contemplating God, one shouldn't get distracted by also actively contemplating something else, even something as closely related to God as God's kingdom.

Why do other people recite this line out loud? Again, several possibilities come to mind: 1) At this point, the line is part of the Shema text; 2) We don't worry about a dead person metaphorically reciting anything; 3) We should be reminded of Yom Kippur every day, so that we will actually act appropriately; 4) So that nobody feels silly or self-conscious when they come to services and presume that if it is printed, it is recited.

It is wonderful that here in Cheyenne we allow and enable people to follow the practices that make them feel more closely connected to God, even when those practices are different from each other. In our own ways, we are all continuing the affirmation of Jacob's children - there is one, unique God, with whom we have a unique relationship.