

Deuteronomy 6:1–9 (ESV)

“Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the LORD your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it, that you may fear the LORD your God, you and your son and your son’s son, by keeping all his statutes and his commandments, which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be long. Hear therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you, and that you may multiply greatly, as the LORD, the God of your fathers, has promised you, in a land flowing with milk and honey.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Mark 12:28–34 (ESV)

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Shema Yisrael

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA

Date: November 1, 2015 Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

God promised the people Israel a land, a land flowing with milk and honey. From the days of Abraham God promised the people Israel a land.

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

Today that promise is filled with complexities. But maybe those complexities were always there. When Abraham came to the land, and many generations later when Joshua came to the land, the land was already occupied. The first books of the Bible narrate the often bloody attempts to conquer the peoples who inhabited the land. Today many see the State of Israel as the rightful heir to those ancient promises even if that means displacing people who were already living there. But others call for justice for the Palestinians who were displaced to form the State of Israel. And it’s even more complicated, just as it was in ancient times, by the fact that religion is as contested as lines on a map.

[Slide 1] The Temple Mount in Jerusalem is a good example. The Temple Mount is generally recognized as the location for the great Solomon’s Temple of Israel. Later it was rebuilt. It played a prominent role in the ministry of Jesus. It was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. Now on the platform on which the Temple sat, Temple Mount, sits the Muslim holy site the Dome of the Rock. To Muslims it marks the spot from which some say the prophet Muhammad ascended to Heaven. Beneath the Dome is a relic from the Jewish Temple, a foundation stone. The stone is held sacred by Jews, who believe it marked the Holy of Holies of the Temple. They also believe it was also the spot where Abraham was instructed to sacrifice Isaac. Christians also hold the Temple site as sacred for it figures prominently in the ministry and death of Jesus.

In many ways this beautiful structure, which preserves one of the earliest examples of Islamic mosaics, and which is the most prominent feature of Jerusalem’s skyline, represents the great pain and failure of religious conflict. Jews mourn at the Western Wall of the Temple Mount for it is as close as they generally can get to the holy site of the old Temple. Many Muslims find their access to Jerusalem restricted, so the holy site is off-limits to them, too. And Christians find the walls of the Dome filled with Muslim anti-Christian quotations. Peace is fragile at best. A satisfactory resolution seems hard to imagine. Three faiths, and several nationalities and ethnicities are locked in a complex tangle of conflicting and intractable claims.

And yet if the Dome of the Rock symbolizes the contested reality of this space, its exquisite magnificence also stands as a testimony that the faiths that struggle here are filled with beauty and even wisdom.

God seems to have understood just how volatile a sacred story and a sacred land can be. “Hear my commandments, O Israel, and be careful to do them, that it may go well with you.” Beginning here and in later chapters in Deuteronomy and then reinforced through the ages in Rabbinic Judaism are God’s prescriptions to keep the commandments close by. “And these

words that I command you today shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” [Slide 2] Many Orthodox and Conservative Jews wear phylacteries on their left arms and foreheads during certain prayers in obedience: You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. Jews commonly place a Mezuzah on doorframes. [Slide 3] For God also commanded, “You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

Mezuzah cases are made of many different materials—wood, metal, or ceramic, for example—and they almost always have the character that looks like a W, which is the Hebrew letter Shin. It is the first letter in a word for God, *Shadai*, almighty, and sometimes the whole word *Shadai* is written out in Hebrew, as it is here. *Shadai* is customarily written on the back of the scroll, too. [Slide 4] The Mezuzah is hung on the left side of doorway (going out) slanted with the top toward the interior. In an interesting insight into Jewish customs, the Mezuzah is slanted because some ancient authorities said it should be vertical and some horizontal, and to acknowledge both possibilities it is slanted.

The Mezuzah itself is actually the Hebrew scroll. [Slide 5] The scroll is tightly rolled and then inserted into a Mezuzah case. The wording on the scroll begins with, “Hear, O Israel,” “Shema Yisrael,” and is often called the Shema.

We read a portion of the Shema this morning. Another part goes, “And if you will indeed obey my commandments that I command you today, to love the LORD your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your livestock, and you shall eat and be full.”

I find these words incredibly beautiful. They express an incredible love for the land and its bounty. Jewish and Middle Eastern the love of the land is different from the love of private property. Here in the United States we can be very protective of our homes and property. Fences often divide us, and neighbors fight over where the fence should go. The wealthy often live in gated compounds out of the reach and sight of others. In Israel the land is more symbolic and less personal and private. The line that defines the boundary of Israel is more important than the property line between neighbors. To properly understand the problem with the Israeli settlers, one must understand that the issue isn’t a scarcity of property in less contentious locations so much as it is the belief in a God-given right to build on the Promised Land. This sense of the land is more community-minded than our more familiar desire for private ownership. The land belongs to the tribe, as it were. But therein lays the conflict, for tribal protectiveness is based on the idea that the land belongs to a people. In Israel-Palestine several peoples claim the same real estate.

So, what does all this have to do with today’s scripture, especially the passage from Mark, which doesn’t have anything to do with the land. Jesus says that most important commandments are, “Shema Yisrael, Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

The last of these commandments, you shall love your neighbor as yourself, comes from Leviticus. Jesus is quoting from the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. He didn’t make up these commandments. They have been Biblical commandments from the beginning. This last

commandment is not explicitly in the Mezuzah scroll, but it is there implicitly. Shema Yisrael, Hear, O Israel, “These words that I command you today,” which means all the commandments of the Torah, “the words I command you today shall be on your heart.”

The passage in the Mezuzah continues, again using beautiful and evocative words. It says, “You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.”

In today’s conflicted world religious leaders seldom teach their children and their followers to love God and love their neighbors, at least not all of them. Children are too often taught to hate in the name of God. Leaders threaten to push one another into the sea. They lay claim to sections of real estate saying that God gave it them alone and forgetting that God demanded that they offer the stranger and the sojourner hospitality because they, too, were—and will be again, one might say—because they were and will be strangers and sojourners themselves.

I wish I had a more novel and original idea about what to do. But the best I can do is agree with the scribe who responded to Jesus, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that God is one, and there is no other besides him. And to love God with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself,” is really the whole of it. The best I can do is think what a difference it would make if these words were written on the human heart, taught to every generation and maybe even written on our doorways as a reminder every time that we go out that this is to be our stance toward those we meet. Shema. Hear what God has to say to us today. Amen.