



## The eternal message

RABBI YAKOV BRONSTEYN  
Parsha Devarim, Deuteronomy 6:1

Let's imagine ourselves in a different time.

It is approximately the year 170 C.E., more than 1,800 years ago. We are witness to a most gruesome and painful sight. Rabbi Akiva, one of the greatest leaders of his generation, is being tortured. Agents of the Roman Empire are scraping his flesh with combs of iron. We stand among his students and notice a deeply moving phenomenon. It is the time to recite the Shema and we hear words that are very familiar. We realize that the soul of this sagacious individual is breaching the barriers of physical adversity in its extreme. As he utters the final word of the prayer, "echad" (He is One), his soul departs his body.

As we are torn asunder by the pain and anguish of what we have just experienced, we are also moved, exhausted and awe-inspired. We are suddenly thrust into a yearning for such profound commitment. We identify with it. It's logical. We value it and sense it in ourselves.

This is not a unique experience. We as Jews have always showed this commitment and resolve through all the vicissitudes of our history.

One father relates his experience of the Sbarro Pizzeria blasts less than 24 hours after that fateful day of Aug. 9, 2001, in Jerusalem, where 15 people were killed and 130 injured.

"My daughter Shira lies bruised, battered and broken after a long surgery that gave her life back. ... Shira is alternately sleeping and awake, drowsy from the painkillers. At one point, she wants to ask me something. 'Daddy, what happened to that family in front of us in line for pizza?'

"I know the family she is talking about. Both parents and three children died in the blast. I try to delay the news of the tragedy, to protect my child from the bitter news until a later time. ... But after several minutes Shira asks again, 'Daddy, how is that family?' I ask her why she asks specifically about them. Shira tells me that the children caught fire in the terrible explosion. A small one cried, 'Daddy, Daddy, save me!' And the father replied, 'Say with me Shema Yisrael - Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One!'

"Then all was quiet, Daddy.' She stares at me. 'What happened to them?'"

We recite these words many times; in the morning, evening, before we go to sleep, at the conclusion of the Yom Kippur service and the moment before we die. These words have been the cry of the Jew throughout the ages. What do they mean? Why are they so important?

We are enlightened by the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto in his book, "The Way Of God" (pages 287-289): "The significance of the first verse of the Shema ... to bear witness to God's unity in all its aspects as well as to accept the yoke of His kingdom and His authority over all creation, and to resolve to give one's life for the sanctification of God's name."

In this week's portion, we encounter these words. This simple formula conveys the following: The creation of the universe and all that it contains is the manifestation of the work of God's hands. Therefore, even though there appears to be an incalculable number of causes, powers and effects in the universe, God is One. He is the only source of all those events.

This is the message that the Jew has conveyed and will convey to the nations of the world until such time as described by the prophet Zechariah (14:9), "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one, and his name One."

*Rabbi Yakov Bronsteyn is a member of the Phoenix Community Kollel staff.*