

What Chanting a Prayer Might Just Do For You

BY DIANE JOY SCHMIDT

Darkening of the Light

When I was a twenty-seven-year-old photojournalist in El Salvador, I was on the way back to the capital, along the winding mountainous roads. As the taxi driver rounded a certain bend, I glanced in the rear view mirror. We were being closely followed by a dark Jeep Wagoneer with wood paneling and tinted windows and a rifle was poking out the back window -- a death squad.

I slowly curled down into the back seat and prayed to every name of God I could think of. The one prayer I knew came back to me from childhood -- the *Sh'ma*. I repeated it until we got back into the city, *Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Elohaynu, Adonai Echad; Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One.*

Beginnings

I didn't understand why it had come to me, even in such a rote way, when it did—in a life-threatening situation. Now, I am learning more. For the first time in many years, I stand with other Jews chanting the *Sh'ma*. I feel a surge of identification and belonging, and because after spending so many years exposed to Navajo spirituality, my understanding is greatly enhanced in the light of that exposure -- and I see no difference in speaking of the Spirit in different languages.

Asking Questions

My interest in Judaism was dormant for many decades while I traveled the world as a photojournalist. Continuing to search for something, even if I didn't realize fully that was what I was doing, I left Chicago and moved out west. Soon after I arrived, I visited the



Navajo educator and linguist Frank Morgan and Rabbi Min Kantrowitz talking over pad Thai (photo by Diane Joy Schmidt)

Navajo reservation and Monument Valley for the *Chicago Tribune*. In the early morning darkness a voice came to me in a dream saying, "Keep asking questions."

A few years later, I was on assignment again and interviewed Frank Morgan, Navajo philosopher, cultural linguist, and educator, who would become my life partner. I moved to New Mexico, where my exposure to Navajo culture and spirituality developed. As my sense of connection to the spiritual grew, so finally did my interest in learning more about Judaism. At this point I encountered Rabbi Gershon Winkler, whose interest in Native American teachings opened the door to my renewed interest in Judaism.

Grounded in Spirit

The part that had tripped me up, that part about 'the Lord is One'—which I had associated with the word 'mono-

theism' and an anthropomorphic God, had always presented a block to me. I see that now as a misunderstanding born of a matter of translation into a Christian culture: the words, especially in English, simply don't do justice to Judaism.

As a child, somewhere I had picked up this idea of God as a sort of Santa Claus, who kept an eye on my drives and desires, which of course never really made much sense. My only connection to the spiritual in Judaism as a child, to something that spoke to my higher self, was in an outdoor evening prayer service at camp. While we sat on wooden benches in the darkness the fireflies came out, and while listening to the service I reached out with my senses to feel the trees, the night, the stars. That experience probably comes closer to what I believe is meant in the *Sh'ma*, and yet at best to speak of God and of knowing what God is presents a paradox.

The best in Judaism—its ethics, its pluralism, and its flexibility—originates, I think, in its awareness of the sacred in everything. I now understand, most importantly, that in Judaism "the Lord is One" in the *Sh'ma* does not especially or even necessarily refer to an anthropomorphic God on high. As learned Jewish scholar Arthur Kurzweil writes in *Kabbalah for Dummies* (not at all for dummies): "The prayer is rich with meaning, every word having layers of significance. But the essence of the prayer is a meditation on the oneness of the universe: God is One, everything is God, everything is One." Very simple!

That of course is not to say things cannot get out of balance. They can and do and harmony must be restored—in Navajo cosmology, patterned after the sacred pattern of the



Diane Schmidt, Camino Real Hotel, El Salvador 1981 (photo by Timothy Ross)

natural world—and upon occasion I have been privileged to attend all-night sings.

That Kabbalistic approach feels akin to what we have dismissed in Native American traditions, and de-



Gilberto Moran translator, first day on the job killed in firefight, El Salvador, 1981 (Diane Joy Schmidt photo)

noted as something inadequate: as "animism" or "pantheism" or "nature-worship." A deeply unfortunate misconception underlying that is the presumption that Native Americans do not have an over-arching concept of God -- they do. As Frank said over coffee one morning, "Everything is divine, everything is sacred—The Great Spirit—that's the way he placed everything." They just don't go around *nam-ing* God -- hmm, sound familiar? They also don't have a word for "religion," since that would be oxymoronic, separating the spiritual from life.

Coming Full Circle

I wonder what the big deal is, really, that causes so many of the world's religions to insist that theirs is the only one true way, that they are the only ones who've got it right, and not only that, to kill one another over bad translations!

Navajos don't insist they are the keepers of the one true spiritual path -- Frank explained that in their teaching, "They say that each ethnic group was given its own ways." The way I understand that is that, just as bluebirds and robins and crows each have been given their own songs, customs and plumage, each grouping of humanity has been given its own songs, language, and prayers, its own way to give voice to the spiritual. One way is not "better" than another.

Frank and I met with Rabbi Min

Kantrowitz for lunch to help me understand the *Sh'ma*, and we convened in an informal cross-cultural dialogue over pad Thai. Rabbi Kantrowitz explained that *Sh'ma* means, "Pay attention, listen with your ears," and *Yisrael*, the name Jacob was given after wrestling with the angel, is "You who wrestle with God, who struggles with trying to understand what God is," and that *Adonai Elohaynu* refers to the unpronounceable name of God."

The conversation opened up and Frank talked at length about the Navajos' transcendent concept of God, which led Rabbi Min to exclaim in an almost child-like voice of wonder, "That's exactly my God concept!"

In Judaism, the *Sh'ma* traditionally is recited twice a day, in the morning and in the evening. In one sense it is recited to provide protection. Another, more obscure, Jewish teaching is that the *Sh'ma* is recited every day to make

sure that it may be on your lips when you die. Things come full circle when you least expect them to. Suddenly I realized how appropriate it was that this one prayer drummed into me as a child, the one prayer I knew, had come into my head as a talisman, a protection, in a frozen slow-motion hour when I was faced with death.

I'm not a cantor or a rabbi, nor am I a very diligent student of Torah, and I still struggle with the concept of prayer. I'm a writer and sometimes a reporter, so these are explorations for me. The good news that I have to report is that a minute, an hour, a night of spiritually focused singing or chanting can definitely raise your spirits and bring you out of dark places, such as the places that those memories from El Salvador would hold me in. I recommend it.

You never know what chanting a prayer might do, or might have done for you, or where it might lead you. I remember the voice that came to me in the dream I had when I first visited Monument Valley, "Keep asking questions," and how indeed, by doing so, unwittingly I have become "one who wrestles with God."

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