

**Good Shabbos Everyone.** We read the Shma in this week's portion Va'Eschanan, as the verse says "Hear O' Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is the one and only." (Devarim 6:4) The Shma is the most important verse in the Torah because it defines the Jewish Nation. We are a nation which believes that Hashem is the Master of the Universe. Rambam explains this principle of Jewish faith in the following way: "I believe in perfect faith that Hashem is One. There is no unity that is in any way like His, He alone is our G-d -- He was, He is, and He will be." (Maimonides' Principles, Aryeh Kaplan Anthology I, p.30)

It is a mitzvah from the Torah to read the Shma twice a day, once at night and once in the morning. Jews also have the custom to read the Shma before going to sleep at night. The mitzvah of reading the Shma two times a day, includes all three paragraphs of the Shma as found in every prayer book. The Great Code of Jewish Law tells us that one should read the Shma intending to fulfill the mitzvah of announcing Hashem's oneness. (Shulchan Aruch, 61:1) The Shma should be read with fear and trembling. (Ibid)

When one looks at the first sentence of the Shma in a Torah scroll, one notices that two letters are larger than the others. The final letters "ayin" of the first word Shma and "dalet" of the last word Echad, are in large print. The Hebrew letters "ayin" and "dalet" spell the Hebrew word "Eyd," which means 'witness.' By reading the Shma, a Jew is testifying to Hashem's mastery over the world. The following true if not unbelievable story, told in the first person, illustrates the power of saying the Shma.

It was the beginning of a long, hot summer in San Diego. We had left Israel for a few years so that we could return soon with a way to earn a living. Rachel, my wife, was in a nursing program and working. I, Mordechai, was looking for work. Money was tight and nerves were frayed. It was semester break, and we knew we needed to get away for a bit. Leaving the kids with a sitter, we set off in our little, dilapidated car for a drive in the desert mountains near Jamul.

In the middle of the desert, alongside the road, we saw a fruit and vegetable stand and stopped for some peaches. A crazy bright green and orange jalopy drove up and stopped, too, bad music blasting as two rowdy young men jumped out. One of them wore his hair in dreadlocks, long, matted twists of hair, while his companion chose the other extreme. He looked as if he had shaved off all his hair with a Swiss army knife.

The dreadlocks didn't look so strange to me. I remembered when I had worn dreadlocks myself not that many years before (I have since become boruch Hashem a Baal Teshuva). So I was the first to reach out. A casual remark about vegetables opened the conversation, and soon we were all talking together about organic produce and other things. Their car had come up from the south, where there was nothing but a bare expanse of desert reaching to the Mexican border. Where could they be coming from?

The guy with dreadlocks explained that they had spent a few days on the Mexican side of the border as part of a "seed group" helping to set up a Native American spiritual gathering. People were coming from as far away as Canada for a three-day happening. The big attraction was a young Indian chief who was a famous healer and spiritual leader. He invited us to the gathering. No matter how much we told them we couldn't go, the two insisted on drawing us a map. On a napkin they sketched back roads that would take us out to the middle of nowhere on the Mexican side of the border.

"By tomorrow hundreds of people will be coming," they assured us. "You shouldn't miss it." Then they hopped back into their bright green and orange jalopy and took off.

Driving home, Rachel and I shared our thoughts. Why did we meet these two men? And why did they insist on drawing us a map after we repeatedly told them we weren't interested? And why was this unusual invitation presented to us just when we most needed to get away from our daily pressures?

By the time we arrived home, we had agreed to go to the Indian gathering to see if there was some hidden divine plan awaiting us there. We packed the car and bought plenty of food. The next day, after Morning prayers, we set off with our kids and our tent. We drove southeast from San Diego through Tecate, the border town in Mexico. Poverty...lots of dogs...lots of garbage...We followed the marks on the napkin along lonely dirt roads that seemed to stretch out endlessly through the desert.

Finally, after many hours, we came to a clearing and saw a group assembling for a major gathering. Many tepees and sweat lodges were already set up. About thirty people were there ahead of us, a mixture of Native Americans and Mexicans with a smattering of adventures Anglos looking for the unusual. We heard more Spanish than English.

Inside a large tent four women were banging rhythms on a drum as big as a dining room table. The drumming went on for hours. We pitched out tent far away, in a remote, beautiful spot, and I walked up to a nearby mountaintop to daven mincha. Then we started a fire, cooked our dinner, and ate under a full moon. The children began to nod off. We tucked them into their sleeping bags and sat near the fire enjoying a quiet cup of coffee under the brilliant stars of the desert sky.

A middle-aged, heavyset woman in a beaded leather dress entered our campsite. "I'm Minna," she introduced herself in American-accented English. She had seen our campfire and wanted to make sure we had lit it safely. We let her inspect it and she gave us her approval, adding, "You'd be surprised how many people don't know how to built a safe campfire."

Despite her long, salt-and-pepper braids, her face, illuminated by the glow of the fire, didn't look Indian. We talked for a few minutes, and then Minna said, "Oh, you don't know that I'm Red Feather's mother. Red Feather is in charge of this gathering." Rachel and I were both thinking the same thing. It is that intuition that Jews have when they meet another Jew.

Finally we asked her. "Yes, I'm Jewish," she said. "And you are, too." Minna was friendly and open. She had grown up as a young girl living on the streets. Then she had married a Native American and joined his tribe. After many years her husband had died, and her son, Red Feather, had grown up to be the new Indian chief and medicine man. He had healing powers and a way of communicating with the spiritual.

"Does Red Feather know he's Jewish?" we asked. "Yes," Minna replied. "He knows."

"Does he know anything at all about being Jewish?"

"No, I never taught him anything," she answered. "I don't know much myself." My wife and I exchanged glances. Perhaps this was the divine plan. "Can we meet Red Feather?"

"I can't promise," Minna said doubtfully. "He's very busy. But I'll try to connect you." Red Feather had had a recent dream

that he considered a prophecy, Minna told us. In his dream, he had seen a twenty-pointed star and he was told to gather many, many people together in this place in the Mexican desert. Right now he was down in the center of the clearing, setting up a large replica of that star on the ground. In the morning, the Native American healing rituals would begin under his direction. Minna stayed a while longer and talked to us by the light of our campfire. She told us about the Native American calendar and we told her about the Jewish calendar, Lahavdil.

After Minna said good night, I went down to the gathering to find Red Feather. I found him marking off a large circle about twenty meters in diameter. It was surrounded by twenty-eight two meter-high branches, whittled down very straight and smooth. Beside each branch was a pole stuck in the ground with a little sack of tobacco tied on top of it. The poles were connected to each other by a string decorated with feathers.

Inside the circle, cornmeal was spread over the hard earth with designs drawn in it. The fragrance of burning sage was everywhere. Red Feather was deep in concentration, reconstructing his vision of the twenty-eight-pointed star. I guessed he was in his thirties, a short, very intense man with long, braided, dusty-blond hair. He didn't look Indian either, except in his dress. I walked into his line of vision, knowing not to get too close, and watched him silently.

I knew Indians. I had taught them in the Alaskan countryside. Indians don't like idle talk. I watched him work and waited for him to be the first to speak. "This star came to me in a vision," Red Feather said at last.

I replied in tight-jawed, sparse, Indian-style English. "Met your mother," He nodded. "She's Jewish." Again he nodded. "You're Jewish."

"Yes," he answered.

"Do you know Shema Yisrael?" I asked.

"No." "Do you know the Hebrew letters?" "No." "Do you know who Abraham is?" "No." "Moses?"

"No. I just know a little about the Merkava. I think the star in my vision is like it." He was speaking about the holy chariot seen in a vision by the prophet Yechezkel thousands of years ago. The Merkava is understood only by the greatest Jewish Kabbalists. It rides in worlds that we cannot enter while we are on this earth, and its secrets are among the deepest mysteries that will be revealed to all with the coming of Mashiach.

I saw that Red Feather liked to work with his hands. He liked to bring the spiritual down into the physical. While he worked, I talked to him about the mitzvahs a man like him would appreciate. I told him about the spirituality of tefillin, tzitzis talis, the city of Jerusalem, and the Holy Temple.

He listened intently. He wanted to put on my tefillin and was disappointed to hear that it could only be done in the daytime. "Tomorrow there will be a big medicine dance," he said. "We break at noon for fifteen minutes. Is that enough time?"

"Yes," I answered, "if there is a quiet place nearby where no one will disturb us." Early in the morning before the others woke up, I prayed shacharis. Then we packed up our car. Hundreds of people were awake by then, drumming and dancing to a mind-numbing beat. We heard they'd be sacrificing buffalo hearts on an altar and doing who knows what other idol worship. We needed to get out of there, but I had made my promise to Red Feather. So we kept our children close to the tent and stayed far away from the dangerous, dark rituals.

At twelve o'clock noon I walked to our meeting place by the star. Red Feather was there. "It's time. Come," I said, tight jawed. Red Feather took the lead and led me down a dusty trail to a secluded area out of view and far enough away to soften the pounding of the incessant drumming. I took the talis and draped it over his head. He repeated the blessing after me. I spoke to him about the ten sefiros, the ten Kabbalistic spheres. Then I took the tefillin out and told him about chesed (kindness), gevura (strength), and tiferes (splendor). Red Feather repeated the Hebrew blessings after me and I tightened the black leather straps on his left hand. Placing the head tefillin on his brow, I told him about chochma (wisdom), bina (understanding), daas (knowledge), and malchus (kingship).

Then the young Indian chief, wrapped in my talis and tefillin, sat with me on a long rock and we said Shema. I suggested some powerful images for him to keep in mind while he meditated. Then I walked off into the brush, leaving him alone to pray to his Creator as a Jew for the first time. Ten minutes later, Red Feather was still motionless. I gave him another ten minutes.

Meanwhile, back at my family's campsite, Rachel could hear people calling for Red Feather. Everyone was looking for him. She chuckled. If only they knew what Red Feather was doing right then. I checked on Red Feather again, He was still deep in meditation. Quietly, I sat down beside him. After a few minutes, I began to hum a niggun, a spiritual Jewish melody. Then I recited a psalm. He didn't move. I told a story about the Baal Shem Tov. He still didn't move.

Finally Red Feather spoke. He was very shaken. "My ancestors were calling me," he said. "I saw a vision of a woman with her hair covered. I have to learn more! Please stay after all the people leave and teach me more about my people and our way of prayer."

"I can't stay," I said softly. "The rituals done here are not the ways of the Torah. I must take my wife and children away. Our Creator has brought us together. How are we to know when His plan for us has been completed? Maybe we have accomplished our purpose in each other's lives. I must go."

Red Feather broke into tears and hugged me. I let him cry for some time. Then I gently took the talis and tefillin off him. We walked back to the gathering together and said our good-byes. I made sure to give him my phone number.

Red Feather never called. Later we moved and our phone number changed. But I know that just as Hashem sent me to Red Feather at that moment in his life, so too will Hashem provide Red Feather with all the help he needs to come back to his people and his heritage. (Editor's note: All names in the story are fictitious; all the details really happened. The narrator of the story is a resident of Tsfas. The writer, Chana Besser, is also a Tsfas resident.) Let us recite the Shema everyday, twice a day, and cry out our perfect faith in Hashem, the One and Only G-d. **Good Shabbos Everyone.**