

Shema

A lifelong ritual becomes a final connection in this reflection by author Lena Munzer on prayer, memory, and loss.

Editor's Note: In this moving reflection on the meaning of prayer, both in ritual and in grief, Lena Munzer captures how the Shema can anchor us through childhood, uncertainty, and even at the end of life. Here, the prayer becomes less a declaration of belief and more a way to listen—for memory, for presence, and for what remains. – Howard Lovy, Editor of Judith Magazine

I lifted my sleep mask and cupped my right hand over my eyes, "*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.*"

The sour stench of morning breath brewed beneath my palm as I mumbled my daily reciting of the *Shema*. My morning ritual began years ago. I had returned home from college and discovered a new pillow enshrined atop my childhood bed. Its white cotton stood out from my pink comforters like stone tablets on Mount Sinai. Inscribed across the pillowcase were the words to the *Modeh Ani* and the *Shema*.

There were only two possible bestowers of this mystery pillow: the King of the Universe, or my stepdad Stu—the synagogue regular, and the opportunistic re-gifter. The standard pillow provided the perfect ratio of stiffness and softness, far superior to the flimsy pink cushions that had

served me through high school. I decided to keep the pillow and began chanting its prayers every morning.

As a twenty-something-year-old, I didn't know what it was I prayed for. I whispered the Hebrew lyrics on autopilot without knowing my *why*: Why did I pray? Was it superstition, my generalized anxiety, or my borderline-OCD tendencies that ritualized life into a to-do list? Can't say. But even when I didn't understand my *why*, I still had an undeniable need to pray. Like breathing, involuntary yet essential.

The *Shema* and I met long before I discovered Stu's pillow on my bed. I was in kindergarten at a Jewish private school. My fellow four-footers and I congregated along the purple carpeted stair steps that formed a semi-circle sanctuary around the *bimah*. Our teachers motioned their hands over their eyes. That was our cue. My classmates and I covered our eyes as if we were a part of an epic game of peek-a-boo.

"*Shema Yisrael*," the room erupted. My eyes pierced through the crevices between my fingers, determined to catch G-d in the act of something *super cool*. I mean, why else would we be closing our eyes? Surely, G-d was surprising us with a gift. A life-size Barbie car or a double-layer chocolate cake would fall from the heavens and plop onto the *bimah* at any moment.

"*Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*."

Silence. Just the soft rustles of my breath. *Inhale*. *Exhale*. I peeked between my fingers and surveyed our

semi-circle congregation. Once others uncovered their eyes, I removed my hand from my face. The bustling butterflies in my tummy turned to mush—no Barbie car or chocolate cake in sight. We continued through the usual prayers until our teachers slid the wooden doors to the ark and unveiled (what I deduced to be) G-d's *Shema* surprise: *The Torah*. The best-dressed book I'd ever seen, sporting velour and gold bling like Snoop Dogg. I knew then I was in the presence of Greatness.

My "love at first *Shema*" story was short-lived. Over the next decade, my purple carpeted sanctuary was replaced by public school and puberty. By the time I reached college, the prayer was all but a distant memory, only resurfacing on the High Holidays and family bar mitzvahs. But like two destined soulmates, the *Shema* and I would find our way back together after college, all thanks to a pillow. *Bashert*.

"*Shema Yisrael*," I recited the words from bed. "*Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*." Morning after morning, I mumbled the *Shema* through my young adulthood, like clockwork. If only I could've flossed with the same discipline! But *why* did I pray? I didn't have an answer. I didn't know what I prayed for every morning. It was like following a North Star obscured under the night sky. I knew there was a light guiding me in my words, even when I couldn't see it. After years of blindly wandering through prayer, my *why* would appear two weeks after my twenty-eighth birthday, on October 26, 2022.

That Wednesday, I stood to Stu's right, completing the semi-circle of loved ones around his hospital bed. My

stepdad had been battling cancer, and now the time had come. His last breath could happen at any moment.

Mom had asked that we recite the *Shema*, so the nine of us congregated in Room 2408. The late morning sun slipped through the room's only window while our white hospital gowns clumped together as if a cloud hugged Stu's six-foot-two stature. The room hung in stillness as glossy eyes studied my stepdad. He was our family's hazzan, leading us in prayer at Shabbat dinners and Passover seders, often adding an unsolicited sermon on Jewish numerology or his own extension of the *Midrash*. But that morning, he didn't have any words left. Just breaths.

Stu's body inflated with each inhale then contracted on his exhale, breathing the words he could no longer speak. *Inhale—exhale. Rise—fall.* The Hebrew word for breath, "*nephesh*," translates to "soul." I imagine breathing as the voice of one's soul. A communication that transcends words, and that can be preserved in the eternal echoes of life.

Stu scanned the room, understanding what was going on but unable to motion his body into prayer. My left hand hovered toward his hazel eyes as my right hand moved toward my face. I closed my eyes, blocking any drizzle of light.

"*Shema Yisrael*," we chanted. My hand shook over Stu's smooth, cold skin. I kept my eyes shut, terrified that if I opened them, he'd be gone.

What divine surprise could G-d pull off this time? Was it too late for a miracle? Darkness filled my field of vision, and an internal black hole vacuumed my last morsels of hope. I imagined Stu's head resting on the blue hospital pillow, the words to the *Shema* flashing across his mind the same way they had been transcribed across my pillow. He didn't say a single word, but inside my dark cloak I imagined the prayer residing in his breath.

Inhale, exhale. "Adonai Eloheinu."

Inhale. "Adonai."

Exhale. "Echad."

Silence.

Four hours later, he was gone.

In Hebrew, "*Shema*" translates to "hear." Today when I recite the *Shema*, I listen for Stu's soul. *Inhale*. My chest rises as I lie in bed, my right hand over my eyes.

For years, I recited the *Shema* without knowing what it was I prayed for. Now I realize the prayer was never a means to an end; its six words were my divine gift. My morning prayer primes my ears and serves as a daily reminder to make space and time to listen to life's lyrics—because even the things, the people, the G-d we cannot perceive with our eyes, we can hear, like eternal echoes. I hear my stepdad in the rustling of crunchy December leaves, in the silence at the dining room table, and every time I step foot inside a synagogue. There he

is. Loud and proud. If only I rest my mind on its pillow and listen.

Exhale. "Echad."

Lena Munzer is a data scientist by day and a writer by heart. She holds a bachelor's degree in economics from Yale University, where she also competed on the women's basketball team. Lena's work has appeared in *The New York Times* ([Tiny Love Story](#)), the *Yale Daily News* ("[Naked](#)"), and in an anthology by the [Chicago Story Press](#). As she pitches her debut memoir for publication, you can find more pieces on her creative nonfiction Substack, [Sidebraid Stories](#). When she's not writing, you can find Lena on stage, either at [The Moth](#) storytelling competition or at a local karaoke bar in Chicago.