God is One

“HEAR OH ISRAEL, THE LORD IS OUR LORD, THE LORD IS ONE”. This phrase was ingrained in me when I was quite young, as it has been in all Jewish children. In Cheder, however, I learned that in the beginning God created heaven and earth; that there was a darkness all around and that the spirit of God floated upon “the face” of the water. I took the word “face” literally and tried to picture what the water’s “face” looked like. I asked the rabbi and found myself the laughingstock of the whole Cheder. “How can water have a face?, asked the rabbi. It appeared that “face” merely meant the surface of the water. But I had another question. I couldn’t understand what it was that was floating upon the surface of the water. I had seen logs and other things floating in the river, but what was it that floated when it was the spirit of God? My biggest trouble came when I said there must have been two — the God and the spirit because God must have remained at some other place while His spirit floated upon the water. “Are there two Gods?”, I asked. Such blasphemy could not be tolerated from a Jewish child and the rabbi struck me from across the table with his “kahntchick” (a round stick with long, narrow leather strips tied to it at one end, to whip the boys with). I had to repeat several times “God is One”.

The rabbi used the kahntchick usually for misbehavior. Apparently, he considered my question as falling in that category. I did not expect the punishment and did not shield my face with my elbow, as I had learned to do. My face showed a mild sign of the whip. My father did not notice it, but my mother did. When I told her what happened, she did not like it, but her face showed reluctant resignation to the acceptable process of education. She closed the incident by assuring me that the “wound would heal in time for me to be a ‘shayner chosen’ ” (chosen bridegroom).

By David B. Schreiber

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