



# Shema: An Introduction and Overview

*The Shema is undoubtedly the uncontested statement of faith for the Jewish people's relationship with God. Yet most people say it so reflexively that it is often more a rote recitation than a profound statement of faith. The simple sentence belies the profundity that these words declare.*

This class is designed as an overview and introduction to the Shema as a totality. The Shema will be depicted not only as a statement, but also as an experience. Both ancient and modern commentaries are offered side by side in an attempt to offer a deeper understanding of this prayer.

## Text #1: Zecharia 14:9

זכריה יד:ט  
(ט) וְהָיָה יְקוּם לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִיָּה יְקוּקָה אֶחָד וְי

And the Lord will be King over all the earth,  
On that day the Lord will be One and His name will be One.

1. What implications do these words have for how we understand the Shema?
2. Zecharia was not talking about his present-day; he is projecting (“one day”). What does this infer about the nature of prayer to God during Zecharia’s times? What kind of time is he projecting?

## Text #2: Rashi—Deuteronomy 6:4

רש"י עה"ת דברים ו:ד  
(ד) ה' אלהינו ה' אחד - ה' שהוא אלהינו עתה ולא אלהי העובדי כוכבים הוא עתיד להיות ה' אחד שנאמר כי אז אהפוך אל עמים שפה ברורה לקרוא כולם בשם ה' ונאמר ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד:

God our God, God is One—God who is “our God” now but not the God of the other nations, God is destined to be the “One God,” as it says, “For then I shall change the nations to speak a clear language so that they may all call out in the Name of God; on that day God will be One and God’s name will be One.”

1. How is this comment similar to that of Zecharia?
2. How does this idea help to explain why the Shema is so central to Jewish life?
3. How else does this text shed light on the Shema?

### Text #3: Abraham's Promise, Michael Wyschograd (Page 40)

The task of Israel is to proclaim that only The Lord [the Lord] is God. The Lord is thus identified by a proper name not by the noun God. "Only The Lord is God" asserts that the one specific person described in the Bible is God. And the specificity of The Lord can only be expressed through the stories recorded in the Bible.

He is the God who created heaven and earth, chose Abraham, brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. This is the reason that the history of the Jewish people plays such an essential role in the definition of The Lord while, in one sense, "creator of heaven and earth" alone defines Him uniquely, in the broader sense only a relatively adequate recounting of His deeds determines that we are speaking about the particular The Lord who is the only God. Without such a recounting, we are likely to be referring to God as an abstract noun rather than to God who does not hesitate to assume a proper name. When a proper name of God recedes into the background, we move into the realm of first causes and unmoved movers, the God of pure reason rather than the covenant partner of Israel.

1. Why does it mean to adopt the Shema as a mission statement?
2. Why say the Shema and make this declaration, according to Wyschograd?

### Text #4: Saadia Gaon—Commentary on the Torah

Shema: Know  
Shema: Accept

רב סעדיה גאון עה"ת  
שמע—דע  
שמע--קבל

1. What is the difference between knowing, and accepting?
2. Why might knowing come first?
3. What does this understanding of the Shema add to our understanding of the Shema?

### Text #5: The Shema, Rabbi Norman Lamm (Page 16)

Saadia's second sense of this word is *kabbel*, "accept," implying faith, commitment, and obedience, as in the Talmudic expression for the Shema, *kabbal'ol malkhut shamayim*, the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. The recitation is not to be a disembodied intellectual declaration, a mere academic exercise, but must represent a profound spiritual, existential commitment to the content and implications of this first verse of the Shema. That is, we are summoned not only to listen but to listen to.

1. Summarize what Rabbi Lamm says here. What does it add to how we understand the Shema?
2. What is the difference between "listen" and "listen to"?
3. How do we act if we "listen to"?

### Text #6: Maimonides, Laws of Kriat Shema 1:4

#### א רמב"ם הלכות קריאת שמע פרק

שמע כשהוא גומר פסוק ראשון אומר א בלחש ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם \* הקורא קריאת כן מסורת היא בידינו שבשעה וקורא כדרכו ואהבת את ה' אלהיך עד סופה, ולמה קורין ועד וחוזר בניו במצרים בשעת מיתתו ציום וזרזם על יחוד השם ועל דרך ה' שהלך שקבץ יעקב אבינו את ושאל אותם ואמר להם בני שמא יש בכם פסלות מי שאינו עומד עמי אביו בה אברהם ויצחק כענין שאמר לנו משה רבינו פן יש בכם איש או אשה וגו' ענו כולם ואמרו שמע ביחוד השם פתח הזקן ואמר, ישראל ה' אלהינו ה' אחד כלומר שמע ממנו אבינו, אלהינו ה' אחד ישראל ה לפיכך נהגו כל ישראל לומר ששכח בו ישראל הזקן אחר, ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד פסוק זה.

When reading K'riat Shema, after finishing the first verse, one quietly says: \*Barukh Shem K'vod Malkhuto L'olam Va'ed\* (Blessed is the Name of the Glory of His Kingdom forever), after which he resumes reading in his usual fashion \*V'Ahavta et Adonai Elohecha\* (You shall love the Lord your God) until the end.

Why do we read this? We have a tradition that at the time that Jacob, our forefather, assembled his sons in Egypt at the time of his death, he commanded and exhorted them regarding the unity of God and the way of God which Abraham and Isaac, Jacob's grandfather and father, followed. Jacob asked them and said to them: "My sons, is it possible that there is among you someone unfit who does not share my belief in the unity of God?", as Moses Rabbenu said: "It may be that there is among you a man or woman..." (Deuteronomy 29:17). They all responded and said: "Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad" (Hear Yisra'el! The Lord is our God, The Lord is One) in other words: "Hear from us, our father, Yisra'el, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One." The elder responded and said: "Barukh Shem K'vod Malkhuto L'olam Va'ed". Therefore, all Jews have the custom to say the praise with which the elder Yisra'el praised, after this verse.

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. How does this text explain the importance of the Shema, or the role that it plays?

### Text #7: Worship of the Heart, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Page 110)

What message does this narrative convey to us? First, that the creed of Shema goes back to the very origin of our history, to the dawn of our collective existence. The solemn declaration is perhaps the first truth, which our great Patriarchs discovered. It became their motto and dominant motif in life. It is not merely a theoretical truth, a philosophical pronouncement, a religious dogma, a norm, however central and endowed with meaning. It is rather the shibboleth of our historical uniqueness, a living doctrine which bears witness to course of ages, uniting us with our Patriarchs, drawing them into our temporal ontic circle, thus lending to our own existence the tenor of "timelessness."... It is indeed the acceptance of a great task, the declaration addressed to the remote past that joins the march of generations committed to one idea. In a word, the reading of Shema is a dialogue between the ages, the continual restaging of the historic meeting of Jacob and his sons, pregnant with paradoxical destiny, full of import.

### Text #8: The Shema, Norman Lamm (Page 21)

According to this *midrash*, our words, repeated twice daily, are addressed not to the general community, *k'lal Yisrael*, but to our very personal intimate forefather Jacob-Israel. In calling out to him across the chasm of the generations, we assure him and ourselves that the One God he worshiped is ours as well; that we continue his tradition, which he entrusted to his children, that we have not and will not falter as we strive to implement the “Kingdom of Heaven” in our own times and our own places.

1. How do Rabbis Soloveitchik and Lamm understand the comments from Maimonides?
2. How do these comments resonate with you?

### Text #9: God in Search of Man, Abraham Joshua Heschel (Page 281)

If God were a theory, the study of theology would be the way to understand Him. But God is alive and in need of love and worship. This is why thinking of God is related to our worship. In an analogy of artistic understanding, we sing to Him before we are able to understand Him. We have to love in order to know. Unless we learn how to sing, unless we know how to love, we will never learn how to understand Him.

1. Summarize the text. What is Rabbi Heschel trying to communicate? Why, do you think?
2. How does the Shema express these ideas?
3. How do Rabbi Heschel's ideas build on what we have already looked at?

### Conclusion: Deuteronomy 6:5-9

(ה) וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְקֹוֹק אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדֶךָ:  
(ו) וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לִבְבְּךָ:  
(ז) וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשֹׁבְתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:  
(ח) וְקִשְׁרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל יָדֶךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:  
(ט) וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:  
ברכת המפיל

You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources. Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart. Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise. Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be *tefillin* between your eyes. And write them on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.