

There is one prayer which the vast majority of Jews—regardless of their personal knowledge or involvement with Judaism—know. Whether by instinct, a sub-conscious intuition, or through Jewish education of one form or another, most Jews can recite the first six words of Judaism’s central prayer, *shema*. It marks the starting point of Jewish education for everyone from small children to adults who are completely unacquainted with their religion and their G-d. But why is the *shema* so central to being a Jew? Why did our brothers and sisters recite it as they were marched to death, and why did they recite it upon returning to the Western Wall? Why is it that these few words and the three brief paragraphs that complete the prayer are recited twice a day, every day? The *shema* deserves this place of honor in our practice and in our legacy because it is the basis of our individual and collective relationship with G-d.

The first verse of “*shema*,” “**Hear (*shema*) O Israel, the L-rd our G-d the L-rd is one**,” contains the main principles of Jewish faith. To utter it with concentration and intention is to “accept the yoke of Heaven.”

When this verse is inscribed in Torah scrolls, two of the letters are written larger than the rest: the “ע” (*ayin*) of “שמע” (*shema*—hear) and the “ד” (*dalet*) of “אחד” (*echad*—one). Allegorical interpretations of the Torah point out that when these two letters are combined in the order of their appearance, they make up the word “עד” (*ed*—witness), as in Israelites’ testimony to G-d’s kingship (as it says in Isaiah 43:10: “You are my witnesses, says the L-rd”). When read in the opposite direction, they make up the word “דע” (*da’*—know). We learn about the centrality of knowledge to one’s spiritual experience from the verse “Know the G-d of your father, and serve Him with a perfect heart”¹.

The first line of *shema*, which (in Hebrew) contains only six words, is divided into three parts, each of which indicates one of the necessary components of a Jew’s relationship to G-d.

“שמע ישראל,” “Hear O Israel,” is Moses’ call to the entire Jewish people, and to every individual Jew, to hear the words of G-d which he has received on Mount Sinai.

In this case, “hearing” is much more than a passive aural exercise; we must actively listen to—and for—G-d’s message. Moreover, we must also try our best to understand and accept it. These words assume an additional meaning when *shema* is being recited, for then they serve as a public declaration: “Let the entire people of Israel hear the things which I, who utter them, proclaim and make known to all.” And for a person who recites *shema* when he is alone, it is as if he were calling upon himself, saying: “Hear and listen, you who are a member of the people of Israel.”

The next two words—“ה' אלקינו,” “the L-rd our G-d”—are the essence of the “acceptance of the yoke of the kingship of Heaven.” With them, we declare that the L-rd is our G-d, that we accept Him and are willing to take His rule upon us.

In the last two words—“ה' אחד,” “the L-rd is One”—we state the main principles of the faith in G-d: His unity and His uniqueness. The words “The L-rd is One” encompasses all of the meanings of the term “One.” “One” does not only stand in opposition to dualism (or trinity, or any other kind of plurality of gods): the term “One” also includes G-d’s one-and-onlyness in the sense that “there is none else besides Him”². Compared with the “truth of His existence,” no other reality counts.

The word “One” also contains the idea that the One G-d is all-inclusive. The *Rishonim* (Ancient commentators) say that when uttering these words during the recitation of *shema*, one should concentrate on G-d’s unity in the seven heavens and on earth. (This is connected with the *gimmatriya*, or numerical value, of the letters of the word אחד (*echad*), one: “א”=1, which stands for G-d’s oneness; “ח”=8, which stands for the seven heavens and earth; and “ד”=4, which stands for the four corners of the earth.) Therefore the *Halacha* (Jewish law) says that one should prolong the uttering of the word “*echad*,” “One,” so that he can think of all the meanings of G-d’s unity.

1 Chronicles 1 28:9
2 Deut. 4:35

The Portion of “*Shema*” (Deuteronomy 6:4-8)

In the name of the Holy ARI, it is said that when reciting this verse, one should identify with its message completely. In other words, one should think and feel that he is willing to give his very life and suffer any pain or tragedy rather than swerve from this declaration that “The L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is One.”

It is an ancient custom to say, “ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד” (*Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le’olam va’ed*)—May the Name of the glory of His kingship be blessed for ever and ever) after uttering the first verse of *shema*. But because this sentence is not written in the Torah, it is said in a whisper and not aloud like the rest of the recitation (see Tractate *Pesahim* 56a).

A simple explanation for this addendum is that after the grand recitation of *shema Israel*, we add words of praise and thanks for being permitted, and able, to say them. Viewed from a different angle, this sentence is the inner completion of *shema Israel*. The first verse of *shema* speaks of G-d’s unity in a way that negates the world’s existence, for “there is none else beside Him.” In order to fill the void created by this negation, we add *Barukh shem kevod malkhuto le’olam va’ed*: His glory occupies all of reality, in place and time. The very idiom “שם כבוד מלכותו”—“the name of the glory of His kingship”—expresses a feeling of awe, for it is not G-d Himself who is mentioned here but rather His inspiration which fills the world, and even the mere “name of the glory of His kingship” is blessed for ever and ever. It is as if we leave behind the perception of the sublime Unity to define G-d’s kingship within the world. Paradoxically, this declaration of the all-encompassing glory of G-d’s dominion acknowledges the significance of a human presence on Earth. For what is a ruler without any subjects? Yet we whisper these words because we are not convinced that we deserve the honor of bearing “the glory of His kingship.” Only on Yom Kippur, when the Jews are like the ministering angels, do we say this sentence aloud.

At this point, we continue reciting the Torah portion of *shema* contained in three paragraphs. This portion concludes the declaration of our relationship with God outlined in “Hear Israel” with active expressions of faith: we should adhere to G-d in emotion—“You shall love”, in words—“[you] shall talk of [these things]”, and in deed—“you shall bind them... you shall write them.”

The inner feeling is one of perfect attachment and devotion: “You shall love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” “With all your heart” means not as a partial emotion, with reservation and hesitation, but with the entire heart. Our Sages said that this recognition should be present in the whole of man’s emotional makeup, even in the inclinations which are not good.

“With all your soul” is interpreted to mean “even if He takes your soul”—namely, a love of G-d which reaches the degree of actual self-sacrifice for His holiness. “And with all your might” means that this love should be great and strong, even greater and stronger than it was in the former statement—even in things which man perceives as more difficult than death. Therefore our Sages state that this may mean “with all of your money”; man should be prepared not only for a one-time sacrifice, but for a life of sacrifice, even if it is a life of continuous poverty and suffering. For this is the essence of “מְאֹד” (*me’od*, might): beyond all measure, beyond all boundaries.

“And these words, which I command you today, shall be upon your heart”: These things are not a matter of one-time acceptance and consent, but should exist in one’s consciousness (“upon your heart”) always. “And you shall teach and repeat them to your children” is the obligation to transmit this awareness to the next generation; the first step towards education is repetition. By making these things clear as possible, and by repeating them until they are internalized, you will be able to teach them most effectively.

“And you shall talk of them”—each and every one should engage in Torah in general, and in this portion in particular, so that it will be in his mouth in the form of explicit statements at all times: “when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way”—when one is at his own home, he cannot rely on his inner awareness alone; he is obliged to engage

The Portion of “*Shema*” (Deuteronomy 6:4-8)

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in the words of Torah and to say them. And when he leaves his private domain, it is incumbent upon him to speak up and make these things known, wherever he is. “And when you lie down, and when you rise up”—the simple meaning is that one should say these verses at all times, be it when one goes to sleep or when one rises, and most certainly when one is awake and active. However, this verse is also the basis for the halachic injunction about the set times for reciting *shema*. *Shema* should be recited at the times which are stated explicitly in this verse: at night, when it is time for lying down, and in the morning, when it is time to get up.

The verse “And you shall bind them for a sign upon your arm, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes” is a practical expression of attachment, in the action of putting on *tefillin*, which contain parchments on which this and a few other Torah portions are inscribed. The *tefillin* are tied onto the arm as a symbol of attachment and acceptance of yoke, and on the head as a crown of glory.

Another practical expression of the attachment to G-d is defined in the next statement: “You shall write them upon the doorposts of your house and on your gates”—namely, by writing these Torah portions on *mezuzah* parchments and placing them on the doorposts of the houses and the city gates.

Yet just as these verses teach us about the literal implementation of G-d’s commandments, (*tefillin*, *mezuzah*), they are also meant to teach us a more general lesson: that the words of Torah must be bonded and intertwined with man, in all aspects of one’s life, and in every way that makes the words of Torah known to others.

General Notes

The recitation of *shema* is defined in Jewish tradition³ as a Torah commandment. The details of how to fulfill this commandment can be found in Maimonides’ *Mishne Torah*, “Laws of Reciting *Shema*,” and in *Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayyim* 58-55. When recited fully, it includes the following verses: Deuteronomy 6:4-9, *Ibid.*, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41, and there are blessings which are to be recited both before and after it. *Shema* should be recited in a clean place, fully clothed, and with a covered head. By beginning or continuing to learn and recite *shema* one can enjoy the most beautiful of relationships—a loving relationship with G-d.

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3 Maimonides’ *Sefer Hamitzvot*, Positive Commandmen #10

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In the reality of our lives in the Land of Israel (and not only there), we are gradually being torn to pieces. Controversies (about everything: foreign affairs and internal affairs, economy, religion, society —) are, in and of themselves, a problem. The gaps are enormous, and there is very little consensus about anything. Worse than that are the hatred and the license to hate; for not only are there differences in ideas and practices: there is also a considerable measure of mutual hatred, a hatred that people are not only unashamed of but also openly demonstrate. And what is worse even than that is the estrangement: people from different sectors, especially the religious and the non-religious, no longer have a common language; they are not only uninterested in encountering each other, but also unable to do so.

The only remedy and solution for causeless hatred is causeless love, and the only remedy for alienation is major, highly focused effort to create rapprochement. When so many people are not interested in meeting with or talking to each other, we must go out of our way to open the doors and pave ways to creating contact despite everything. We are commanded not only to “seek peace,” but also to “pursue it” (Psalms 34:15) – just as when something that we badly need is not within reach, we must chase for it in order to attain it.

We must therefore go out to the streets and create contacts with people—every kind of people: from those who are sublime human beings to those who are just plain people, about whom the best thing one can say is that they too are God’s creatures. Such contact cannot be made through idle talk or “dialogues” (intelligent or stupid); rather, it should be created through attempts to impart contents, and to do it in ways that the listener can at least absorb, and perhaps even understand and identify with.

Although one can never know what impact such things may have, realistically speaking one should not expect such encounters to bring about miracles. But still one should work, try, make efforts to create some point of connection. Even partial and temporary connection is something about which our Sages (Song of Songs Rabbah 5, 3) say: “Open for me an opening as narrow as the point of a needle, and I will open for you an opening through which chariots and wagons can pass.”

The *Shema* is one of the few things in which there still is a point of encounter between very different kinds of people within the Jewish nation. There are still positive memories and fractions of memories of, as well as an attitude of respect, for *Shema Yisrael*, “Hear O Israel.”

When meeting with people and suggesting to them to say the *Shema*, or at least to carry the text with them, we grant Jews the possibility to connect not only with us, but also—which is so much more important—with their own essence.

This must be done graciously and in good measure; but every such encounter, by its very existence, is both a path and a message.

Surely, something like this does not come easy to everyone; sometimes one has to gird oneself with “holy chutzpah” in order to overcome natural shyness. One should also be prepared for negative reactions (such as taking stock with other people’s transgressions, or incitement, and the like); but if one prepares oneself ahead of time, one may encounter other things as well. Thus, “he that follows after righteousness and mercy,” even if at first he may be taken to be a hopeless nuisance, is guaranteed that eventually he will “find life, prosperity and honor” (Proverbs 21:21).

In a certain sense, this is an elections campaign—but not for this or that party or leader: rather, it is a campaign for the real choice—namely, to “choose life” (Deuteronomy 30: 19).