



JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

THE JEWISH PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

SOURCE SHEET AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



The Shema is our Pledge of Allegiance, one of the first Hebrew phrases we are taught and it is with us on our lips each day until our dying breath. What makes it so special, what does it mean and what should we think about while saying it. These are some of the questions we will hopefully answer in this module.

SOURCE 1: *The Shema, Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:4-9 Acceptance of God as the Single Source to All of Existence*

Hear Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One.

שמע ישראל יהי אלקינו יהי אחד :

Break the verse of the Shema up into its component phrases (e.g. Hear Israel...the Lord our God... the Lord is One), and try to understand the verse phrase by phrase. There are many questions that arise when trying to come up with a basic understanding of this verse. Pay attention to word choice, redundancies and any other nuance in the verse you can detect and list as many questions as you can.

After you're done, take a look at my questions on the last page of this module. We will try to answer most if not all of the questions through learning the following sources:

Q: What do you think is meant by the imperative form of the verb Shema – "Hear"?

SOURCE 1A: *Targum Onkelos, Devarim 11:13 – To listen is to accept.*

"And if you will **listen**" – If you will **accept**.

והיה אם שמוע - והיה אם קבלא תקבלון

SOURCE 1B: *Rav Saadiah Gaon, Translation of the Shema, Devarim 6:4 – "Shema" means to know and internalize that there is only one God.*

Know Israel, that the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

דע ישראל, כי יהי אלקינו הוא יהי האחד

These sources are pointing towards internalizing the truth of God's Oneness, taking it to heart, and accepting it upon ourselves. The Rabbis often refer to this task as accepting upon oneself Ol Malchus Shemiam, or the Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven?

Q: How do you think knowing and integrating the idea that God is one, makes G-d king over us?

Knowing that G-d is one means that G-d is in charge of and organizing all of my life. When we accept this upon ourselves, we are ready to further His aims, perform His commandments, and make His Oneness more manifest in the world. In practical terms He becomes "a felt presence in our lives".

Q: Hear Israel: Are we calling out to the Jewish People collectively also known as Israel, or perhaps to ourselves, or maybe even calling out to Yaacov, who is also referred to as Israel?

SOURCE 2: *Rabbi Norman Lamm, The Shema: Spirituality and Law in Judaism, p. 19 – Israel refers to the Jewish people.*

Israel: The plain sense of this word in the biblical verse is fairly obvious: "Israel" here refers to the entirety of the people summoned by Moshe to hear the proclamation of Divine unity. Similarly, when an individual worshipper recites these words, he is making a public proclamation. He thereby testifies to his belief, as it were, before all Israel. (including himself)

The basic understanding is that we are calling out to ourselves to declare this fundamental truth in front of all of Israel. Consider the following medrash, however, which links this declaration to Yaakov as well:

SOURCE 3: *Medrash Rabbah Devarim – With Shema we proclaim our allegiance to the heritage of our forefather Yaakov.*

Rabbi Levi said: And what does Israel (the Jewish people) say nowadays? – "Hear O Father Israel (Yaakov), we practice that which you commanded us: The Lord is our God, the Lord is one."

אמר רבי לוי ומה ישראל אומרים עכשיו
שמע אבינו ישראל אותו הדבר שצויתנו
נוהג בנו הי אלהינו הי אחד.

Question: Why do you think the Medrash suggests that this might be referring to Yaakov? Isn't it more plausible that it would refer to either to each Jew individually or to the collective Jewish People?

As mentioned by Rabbi Lamm above in source #3, when we say Shema we are giving testimony, publicly proclaiming our belief in an all knowing, all powerful God before the Jewish People. The medrash, however in the above source picks up on a tradition recorded in the Talmud that the sons of Jacob were actually the first Jews to utter the Shema, way before the commandment was given to his children.

So perhaps we can look at the term "Yisroel" as both referring to the Jewish People and to Yaacov our forefather. Yaacov as the last of the forefathers, made it his mission to bring everything in his life under the one umbrella of God. His life was the fulfillment of the "Shema" in action, so we as his children pledge to continue his life's work with every utterance of the Shema, throughout the ages. Let's move on to the next phrase in the Shema, The Lord our God":

Question: What do the two names of God, the Lord and Our God mean to convey?

There are several answers to this question but let's focus on one explanation by looking at the first time that these names are used in the Torah:

SOURCE 4: Rashi on first phrase in the Torah "bara elokim". Bereishis 1:1

When God created heaven and earth...**Bereishis 1:1**

Rashi: **God created:** It does not state ברא ה' "The Lord (the Merciful One) created, because at first God intended to create the world under the attribute (rule) of strict justice, but He realized that the world could not thus endure and therefore gave precedence to Divine Mercy, allying it with Divine Justice, As it is said (Genesis 2:4) — "In the day that the **Lord God** made earth and heaven". (**Lord of Mercy** precedes **God of Justice**)

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם
וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:

בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים וְלֹא נֶאֱמַר בָּרָא ה',
שֶׁבְּתַחֲלָה עָלָה בְּמַחֲשָׁבָה לִבְרֹאתוֹ
בְּמִדַּת הַדִּין, רָאָה שֶׁאִין הָעוֹלָם
מִתְקַיֵּם, הַקָּדִים מִדַּת רַחֲמִים וְשִׁתְּפָה
לְמַהֲדָּד, וְהֵינּוּ דִּכְתִּיב בְּיוֹם עֲשׂוֹת ה'
אֱלֹהִים אֶרֶץ וְשָׁמַיִם

The name **Elokim** symbolizes strict judgment, because with this name God created the world with distinct boundaries, rules and prescribed goals. However, the name **Lord (yud/heh/vuv/heh)** symbolizes mercy, or bending the rules, as is sometimes necessary when people don't live up to expectations.

If we read these definitions of God's name back into the Shema itself we have the following statement:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

Hear Israel, the God of Mercy, our God of judgement, God is One?

A G-d of Mercy and a G-d of Judgement seem incompatible to us. Don't we all have a hard time putting together the blessings and the good that come to us in our lives, with all the hardships and tragedies that befall us and others? Perhaps we can better understand this conflict by introducing our next question:

Q: Why doesn't the Shema just say "Hear Israel, the Lord our God is One"? Instead, it repeats "lord" and says "Hear Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One".

G-d's oneness means he is orchestrating the totality of our lives, both the good and the not so good. We need to know that though sometimes we may experience His guidance as mercy and sometimes as judgement, it's not contradictory. **The Lord is One.** It all emanates from One Merciful Father, who's sole motivation is love and bestowing true goodness upon us. We may not be able to experience it as such as we go through it, but one day we will.

We have a custom of covering our eyes when we say the Shema, which relates to this discussion:

SOURCE 5: Rabbi Shraga Simmons -- Shema Yisrael, Aish.com

...When a Jew says Shema, it is customary to close and cover one's eyes. The other time in Jewish tradition that one's eyes are specifically closed is upon death. Just as at the end of days we will come to understand how even the "bad" was actually for the "good," so too while saying the Shema we strive for that level of belief and understanding.

We cover our eyes in a sense, to allow ourselves to perceive beyond what our eyes allow us to see, for the moment.

Consider the following source that builds upon the last which is both hopeful and motivating:

SOURCE 7A: *Rashi on the Shema. "The Lord, Our G-d, the Lord is One"*

The Lord our God, the Lord is One: The Lord who is now our God and not the God of the other Peoples of the world, He will in the future be The One God (for all Peoples), as it is said:

(Zephaniah 3:9) "For then I will turn for the Peoples a **clear language** that they may all call upon the name of the Lord".

ה' אלהינו ה' אחד. ה' שהוא אֱלֹהֵינו
עתה, ולא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֻמּוֹת, הוא עֲתִיד
לְהִיּוֹת ה' אֶחָד, שְׁנֹאמַר(צפי חיי) כִּי אֶז
אֶהְפֹּךְ אֶל עַמִּים שֶׁפֶה בְּרוּרָה לְקַרֵּא
יְכַלם בְּשֵׁם ה'

Rashi offers that the Shema is a clarion call to the Jew alerting us to a mission: Now the Lord, is our G-d, but the messianic era will be ushered in when all the nations are clear He is the One and only G-d. This is the beautiful universal vision of Judaism, which calls us to be a "light unto the Nations".

SOURCE 7B: *cont. in Rashi (quoting the last line of our familiar Aleynu Prayer)*

....and it is further said, "**On that day shall the Lord will be One (אחד) and His name One**". (Zechariah 14:9).

וְנֹאמַר בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִי ה' אֶחָד,
וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד. עי' ספרי. זכריה י"ד

The beautiful last line of our Aleynu Prayer is taken from the prophet Zecharia who promises that In the Messianic era when there will be a clarity achieved surrounding God throughout the world, "**On that day the Lord will be One and His Name will be One**".

Q: What does it mean that the Lord and His Name will be One? When are they not One?

Perhaps, we can read it right back into the wording of the Shema, "**Hear Israel**", "**The Lord our G-d**" is referring to our current world where His true essence (Lord) is veiled and His presence in the world is hidden, where we experience Him only through His Name (Elokenu - Our God). (Someone's name is more than what he is called. It's how he is known). There will come a time, where "**The Lord is One**", when He is known without any confusion nor any concealment. On that day He and His Name will be One. (based upon Sifri Parshas VaEstchanon 31)

With every declaration of the Shema and with every mitzvah that we do from the Torah, we bring that day closer to being a reality; G-d becomes more clear and present in the world through His Chosen People. It's an awesome opportunity!

Let's Summarize:

The Shema is a declaration that we make affirming:

1. That God is our King orchestrating the circumstances of our lives.
2. That we seek to see this more each day and live with God as a felt presence in our lives.
3. That all the circumstances of our lives, both sweet and less so, come directly from God.
4. The we and our People will one day see the unifying thread of love behind His actions.
5. Through the shema and the mitzvos we make God more revealed in the world, slowly but surely unifying His Name among all Peoples.

EXTRA CREDIT:

One last question remains from the list above that we didn't get to yet:
Take a look back at the Shema at the top of the first page of this module.

Q: Why is the last letter (ayin) of the word Shema and the last letter of the word Echad (dalet) written large, while all the other letters of the Shema are normal size? Any ideas?

SOURCE 8: Rabbi Yaakov ben Asher (Baal HaTurim), Devarim 6:4 – Why are there larger letters in the first sentence of the Shema?

The ayin [of שְׁמָע, Shema] and the dalet of אֶחָד [are both big to spell the word] עד – **witness**.

ד"א עי"ן ודל"ת גדולים הרי "עד" וזהו "ואתם עדי
נאם ה'" וגם הקב"ה הוא עד לישראל כדכתיב
"והייתי עד ממהר"

Coded in large letters in the Shema is the word "Witness".

Q: What do you think it means? Is it a good one-word summary for the Shema and our mission in the world? How so?

The Jewish People are living witnesses bearing testimony to the Truth and Unity of G-d whether through our history, our achievements, our impact upon the world or through the amazing wisdom of our Torah. When you say the Shema imagine yourself bearing witness to the reality of a world designed and run by G-d; And acquit yourself in a manner that other peoples will say there goes a Jew, the chosen People of G-d.

THE SHEMA

שְׁמָע יִשְׂרָאֵל ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ ה' אֶחָד

Hear Israel the Lord our God the Lord is One.

Some of my questions on the Shema:

1. The first word of the commandment could have been "say, declare, acknowledge or know" that God is One? What is meant to be conveyed by the word Shema, "Hear", and why is it in the imperative form?
2. The commandment is directed at "Yisroel". Does that refer to the individual, the collective or maybe it's a reference to our forefather Yaakov, who was also known as Yisroel?
3. Couldn't the verse just say Hear Israel Hashem is One. Why do we need Hashem Elokenu (the Lord our God) as a qualifying description?
4. And even if we need to qualify Hashem with Elokenu, why repeat Hashem twice? Just say Hear Israel, Hashem our God is One.
5. What are the two different names of God supposed to convey to us?
6. Hashem being One is the central thrust of the Shema What does it mean?
7. Why is the Ayin of Shema (3rd letter) written large in the verse as well as the last letter Dalet in the word Echad?