

What is the Shema?

The Shema is the watchword for Israel's faith and your faith in Israel's God, if you chose to sojourn with Israel. It declares exclusive loyalty to YHVH. It affirms God's unity and His sovereign reign as King over the universe.

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The Shema was the answer that Jesus gave the Pharisee when asked the question, "which is the greatest commandment in the law?" Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt. 22:36-37). The words of the Shema have been central in Jewish worship, liturgy, and prayer for thousands of years. According to the Babylonian Talmud¹, Jewish boys were taught this prayer as soon as they could speak, it was said in times of joy and despair, and it was the last prayer uttered on their deathbed. It was the ultimate declaration of Jewish faith, the affirmation of Judaism, and the profession of monotheism because it contained the basic tenet of Judaism, the unity of God. As early as the second century C.E., the Shema consisted of three portions from the Hebrew Scriptures that were to be recited every morning and evening; Deuteronomy 6:4-9, 11:13-21, and Numbers 15:37-41. The first passage declares the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, the second passage declares the acceptance of the yoke of God's commandments, and the third passage deals with putting on tzitzit², a reminder to keep all of God's commandments. Israel is to remember and to do God's commandments because God has brought them out of Egypt. God purposed to be their God and called Israel to be His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, and a light to the nations of the earth. But what

¹ The Talmud is a compilation of two books: the Mishnah, or Oral Law and the Gemara, the commentaries on the Mishnah. There are two versions of the Talmud, the Jerusalem Talmud compiled in the late 5th century C.E. and the more extensive Babylonian Talmud compiled in the late 6th century C.E. They contain a collection of ancient rabbinic laws, commentaries, and traditions related to Torah.

² The fringe affixed to the four corners of a tallit, the Jewish prayer shawl. Each tzitzit has 608 strands of thread and 5 knots, totaling 613, the number of the commandments in the Torah.

does it mean to accept the yoke of the Kingdom of God upon one's life? And how would this fulfill God's purpose for Israel and the nations?

The Yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven

The first paragraph of the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9, speaks of the acceptance of the yoke of God's Divine Kingdom and rule. The Shema has been described as a declaration of faith, a creed. It has often been called the watchword of Israel's faith (Wilson, 1989, p. 123). When the Shema is read, it speaks of the absolute singularity of God, it affirms faith in the one and only God who created the universe, it affirms the promise that God alone rules the universe; He revealed the Torah to Israel and will one day redeem the world from injustice and strife by righting all the wrongs and ushering in a better age (Hoffman, 1997, p. 19). In this paragraph Moses addressed the individual Jew (Donin, 1980, 151) and the foreigner who sojourns with Israel (Ex. 12:38):

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Dt. 6:4-9, Jewish Study Bible, JSB).

The Hebrew word *Shema* expresses the idea to hear with attention or obedience. To "yoke" means to link, join, unite, to bond or couple together for a specific work. The Hebrew word "yoke –*ole*" in rabbinic literature serves as a metaphor, it means a yoke on the neck; it signifies animals linked to the plow and to one another making farming possible. Thus, the yoke of Heaven constituted hearing with attention and accepting the existence of God as one and unique with a public declaration that there was no other (Kravitz and Olitzky, 1993, p. 50). The decision to submit to God in prayer, not the prayer itself, is the equivalent of the acceptance of

the yoke of God upon one's neck. The Shema establishes the approach to God, the undertaking to work alongside God as an instrument of His holy purpose in submission to Him out of fear and trembling (Levin, 2002, p. 130). The Shema asserts monotheism, when spoken publicly it was a proclamation of exclusive loyalty to YHVH³ as the sole Lord of Israel and its recitation was given legal significance. The prayer was regarded as a legally binding oath to carry out the requirements of Torah (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 380).

The Requirements of Torah

The requirements of Torah, with regards to the yoke of Heaven, consists of three elements: an affirmation of belief in God's unity and His sovereignty over the world; a deep, abiding, and unconditional love of God; and the study of His teachings (Donin, 1980, p. 148). The first element describes the proper relationship between YHVH and Israel: "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Dt. 6:4). Thus, YHVH alone is Israel's God and there is to be no other. This is in keeping with the first commandment in the Decalogue: "I the Lord am your God...You shall have no other gods beside Me" (Dt. 5:6-7, JSB). In other words, even though other people worship various beings and things they consider divine, Israel is to recognize YHVH alone as sovereign over creation (Sarna, 1996, p. 76). Moses argued that Israel had an obligation to worship God alone because it was YHVH that freed them from the bondage of Egypt, "The Lord...brought you out of...Egypt, to be the people of His inheritance... Acknowledge and take to heart... that the Lord is God in heaven above and earth below. There is no other" (Dt. 4:20, 39, New International Version, NIV). This placed the emphasis on Israel serving only the Lord, to the exclusion of any other gods (Schoeman, 2003, p. 51). Israel is to be in relationship with YHVH alone, like a marital relationship where the Lord is a husband and Israel a wife. In essence,

³ Tetragrammaton, it literally means four letters. The four Hebrew letters, Yud, Hay, Vav, Hay compose the inexpressible name of God and were originally pronounced "Yahweh."

Israel is to restrict her fidelity to YHVH, just as a wife restricts her fidelity to her husband alone.

The second element is a deep, abiding, and unconditional love for God; “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Dt. 6:5). In Biblical Hebrew “heart -*laybawb*” refers to the interior of the body, and means the seat of thought, intention, feelings; and “soul - *nehfesh*” refers to the seat of emotions, passions, and desires. In this exhortation the emphasis is on the word “all”. In other words, since YHVH alone is Israel’s God, Israel must love and serve Him with undivided devotion and single-mindedness (Sarna, 1996, p.77). The Hebrew word “might – *me’od*” means physical strength, with force and abundance. However, according to rabbinic tradition, it also came to mean resources or property, thus one is to love God with all their money and worldly possessions (Plaut, 1981, p. 1366). Put together, this paints a picture of one who loves God with their entire life channeled to serve Him, with all their soul, even if it required them to forfeit their life, and with all their resources, even if it caused them to lose all their money and property (Scherman, 1996, p. 442). Love of God is the root for all obedience. The love of God in Deuteronomy is not only an emotional attachment to Him, but something that expresses itself in action. This is in keeping with the fact that Hebrew verbs for feelings refer to the actions that result from them (Sarna, 1996, p. 77). In the book of John, Jesus expressed this thought when he said, “If you love me, you will obey what I command... Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me” (Jn. 14:15, 21, NIV). It involves a holy fear and reverence that expresses itself in single-minded loyalty and wholehearted obedient service.

The third element is the study of Torah; they have to know God’s Word in order to put it into practice:

Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Dt. 6:6-9, JSB).

The importance accorded to God's instruction is seen in the verses: "these words are to be upon your heart, you shall teach them diligently and talk of them constantly, bind them as a sign on your body⁴, and write them on your doorposts⁵ and city gates." The word "impress - *shanan*" in Hebrew means to teach diligently, repeat, speak about, and recite them to your children (Sarna, 1196, p. 78). Parents have a responsibility to teach God's instructions to their children and to speak of them constantly among themselves, when they were at home or away, when they laid down and got up, in other words at all times. Not only must God's Word be remembered and spoken of constantly, but copies of God's Word are to be worn on their bodies, placed on the doorposts of their homes, and on the gates of their cities. The purpose of study is to train the whole person for lifelong, obedient service in the knowledge of God and Torah was given to them to keep them on the path. The aim of learning is holiness in living, set apart unto God in every dimension of life (Wilson, 1989, p. 279).

God's purpose for Israel and the nations

Sinai marked the spiritual birth of Israel's destiny. It was here that God spoke to Moses:

⁴ Tefillin, a small black leather box that contains pieces of parchment on which passages from the Torah are inscribed. Tefillin is strapped onto the left arm and the forehead of Jewish men while they recite their prayers, with the exception of Shabbat or holidays. Tefillin are a sign of faith and devotion.

⁵ Jewish tradition takes this to be a command to put a mezuzah on the door of one's home. A piece of parchment is inscribed with verses from the Torah, rolled up, inserted into a decorative container and attached to the doorway. It is affixed at an angle to the right hand door jamb and marks a Jewish home.

If you obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the people...you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5-6, JSB).

In Hebrew the word “treasured possession - *seghullah*” means personal property. Israel was to be the personal property of a king, distinct from that used for public purposes (Berlin and Brettler, 2004, p. 146). As a kingdom of priests, Israel was to minister to the rest of humanity, bringing knowledge of God and His Word to the nations. They were to live as a holy nation bound by a code of holiness—God’s commandments. The entire nation was to be dedicated to leading the world toward an understanding and acceptance of God’s mission, that one day He would be King over all the earth and His name alone would be exalted. The Shema is a description of a proper relationship between Israel and God. He alone is Israel’s sovereign God, and as His treasured possession, Israel is to accept the yoke of His Kingship and live in compliance with His commandments. They were invited to link with God for a specific work, as a kingdom of priests and as a holy nation they were to be a light to the nations demonstrating the way to God. According to the prophet Zechariah, what has been true for Israel will, in the future, be true for all humanity: “the Lord will be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be one and His name one” (Zec. 14:9, JSB). In the future, the nations will be required to acknowledge Israel’s God as King and live under His Kingship in compliance with His commands. This will happen when Messiah arrives; He will usher in an age of perfection, wrongs will be made right, and “the Lord alone will be exalted” (Isa. 2:17, NIV) among the nations. This means that YHVH will be recognized exclusively and His name alone will be invoked in prayer and oaths, for the nation or kingdom that does not serve Israel’s God shall perish; such nations shall be destroyed (Isa. 60:12)

In conclusion, the Shema is the watchword for Israel’s faith and your faith in Israel’s God, if you chose to sojourn with Israel. It is the ultimate declaration of exclusive loyalty to YHVH. It affirms God’s unity and His sovereign reign as King

over the universe. It requires one to possess a deep abiding love for God, to earnestly study His Word with attention towards obedience, being set apart for God in every dimension of your life because like Israel, “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may proclaim the mighty acts of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9, NIV). Thus, you link and yoke with the call of Israel to bring the knowledge of God and His Word to the nations, leading the world toward an understanding and acceptance of God’s mission, that one day He will be King over all the earth and His name alone will be exalted.

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