

# What is the Shema?

*By Timothy Mackie*

The Shema refers to a couple lines from the book of Deuteronomy (6:4-5), that became a daily prayer in Ancient Israelite tradition. It's the equivalent of the Lord's prayer ("Our Father in heaven...") in Christian tradition. The Shema gets its name from the first Hebrew word of the prayer in **Deuteronomy 6:4**, "Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone." The English word "**listen**" renders the Hebrew word "**shema**." In traditional Jewish prayer practice, these lines from **Deuteronomy 6:4-5** were combined with other passages from the Torah (**Deut. 11:13-21** and Num. 15:37-41), and were prayed in the morning and the evening. This prayer has been one of the most influential traditions in Jewish history, and functioned both as the Jewish pledge of allegiance and a hymn of praise.

The Shema appears in the opening section of Deuteronomy, which is a collection of speeches attributed to Moses before the next generation of Israel entered the Promised Land. Moses challenges them with his wisdom and warning because he doesn't want these Israelites to repeat their parents' mistakes. Rather, he invites them to respond to God's grace and mercy with love, faithfulness, and obedience. The book is designed to have three large sections, the centerpiece for the first opening section of Moses' speech to the people.

*"Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being, and all your might." -**Deut. 6:4-5***

## Translating the Shema

Bible geeks, you will find this part really interesting. But be warned, it's kind of complicated! From ancient times, there has been much debate on how exactly to translate and interpret the Shema, due to ambiguity in the grammar of the main sentences. In Ancient Hebrew, there is no present-tense verb equivalent to the English verb "is." There is a word for "was" (Heb. hayah) and "will be" (Heb. yihyeh), but "is" doesn't exist; rather, two words are put next to each other and the word "is" is inferred.

For example:

English: “The car is red.” Ancient Hebrew: “The car red.”

Ancient Israelites obviously had a concept of the verb “is,” they just didn’t use a word to express it in their language. Rather, they used this grammar tool of simply placing two words together (Hebrew grammar nerds call these nominal clauses).

The problem in translating and interpreting the Shema arises from the fact that it’s made of two back-to-back sentences that lack the word “is.” In Hebrew, the prayer consists of four nouns in a row.

Hebrew: YHWH ‘elohenu YHWH ekhad English: Lord our god Lord one

As you can see, we’ve got four words, and depending on where you place the word “is,” you can end up with different sentences.

- 1 The Lord our God is one Lord.
- 2 The Lord is our God, the Lord is one.
- 3 The Lord our God, the Lord is one.

At the end of the day, the meaning between these options isn’t drastically different, but each one has a different emphasis. Is the point that the Lord God is one and not many (#1 or 3), or is the emphasis on the fact that only the Lord is our God (#2)? Does the Shema claim that Israel’s God is one being, or is it highlighting that the Lord alone is Israel’s God and not any other?

As you’ll see in a moment, this last meaning seems to fit the overall context of Deuteronomy much better. In other words, the Shema isn’t trying to make a philosophical statement about God’s essence or being (that God is “one”). Rather, the Shema is a pledge of allegiance to the Lord God of Israel that excludes allegiance to any other gods.

### **Polytheistic Threat**

As you read further in Deuteronomy, this will make perfect sense. The Israelites have been steeped in polytheistic cultures for generations. From their roots in Canaan, to the long years in Egypt, to their travelling through Canaanite territory in the wilderness, they have been surrounded by people worshipping many different gods. Moses clearly believes that loyalty, obedience, and love to their one true God is the only way to life. One of the greatest threat to Israel’s future was dividing their allegiance between many gods. And so, the Shema is a daily reminder that “The Lord our God alone

is our God.” The prayer goes on from here to show the value of passing this conviction on to later generations to spare them the tragic results of idolatry to other gods.

*“You shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise up.” -**Deut. 6:7***

### **Meaning of the Shema**

The opening line “Listen, O Israel” does not simply mean to let the sound waves enter your ears. Rather, the word “listen” here means allow the words to sink in, provide understanding, and generate a response. In other words, in Hebrew, “hearing” and “doing” are basically the same thing, but what is Israel to do in response to hearing that the Lord alone is their God? “Love the Lord your God.” In context, love isn’t simply the warm, fuzzy, emotional energy we feel when we like someone. In the Bible, love is action. You love someone when you act in loyalty and faithfulness. And so for Israel, to love meant faithful obedience to the terms of their covenant relationship. Those terms are the laws and commands that will make up the body of the book (**Deut. 12-26**). Obedience to these laws was never about legalism or trying to earn God’s favor. Obedience in the Old Testament is about love and listening. If an Israelite loves God, it will make it easier to listen and absorb his teachings and guidance. This is why the words “listen” and “love” are so tightly connected and repeated through these opening speeches of Deuteronomy.

### **Shema Usage in the New Testament**

As we mentioned above, the Shema became a twice-daily prayer within Judaism. It was so widely practiced in the second-temple period, Jesus himself grew up praying it. This prayer was formative for Jesus, and he drew upon it in his teachings. He was once asked which command in the Torah was the greatest:

*Jesus answered, “The first of all the commandments is, ‘Listen, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. This is the first commandment. The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” -**Mark 12:29-31***

In the book of Revelation, John the visionary drew upon this prayer to describe Jesus' followers. Part of the Shema prayer in **Deuteronomy 6:8** contains these words: "You shall bind these words as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as symbols between your eyes." The physical location "on your hands" and "between your eyes" is a symbol with fairly obvious meaning. Your eyes are the place where you see and you use your hands for almost everything you do. This prayer was to guide the vision and action of every moment of life. This is why John the visionary says that in the new creation, when God's people live in intimate proximity to God and the risen Jesus, "They will see God's face, and his name will be on their foreheads" (**Rev. 22:4**).

This is in contrast to people who reject the way of Jesus. They have given their allegiance to other powers that are bent on destroying them (depicted as "beasts" in **Revelation 13**). John the visionary also drew upon the Shema to depict a human life on the path of destruction:

"The Beast also forced all people, great and small, rich and poor, free and slave, to receive a mark on their right hands or on their foreheads." -**Rev. 13:16**

For John, the choice is a stark one. You either give your allegiance to Jesus and allow it influence how you see and act, or your allegiance will belong to destructive powers that will also govern how you see and what you do in life. One path leads to life, the other to death. All of these ideas and images come from Moses' words in Deuteronomy, specifically from the Shema.