

BEULAH HEIGHTS UNIVERSITY

The Shema: The Role and Significance in the Life of Judaism

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Bi 501

Old Testament

by

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Introduction

The Shema is the most fundamental expression of the Jewish faith. Also known as Sh'ma Yisrael, the words prayed from Deuteronomy 6:4 were held to high esteem by Ancient Israelites. Under Roman Rule in 132 CE, a passionate yet misguided follower named Akiva was put to death for leading a rebellion against the Romans for what he believed. While he was being put to death, he began to recite the Shema. The Roman General surprisingly discovered Akiva was not wincing at the pain, rather, he was smiling. Confused as to why Akiva was smiling at such a discouraging moment, he inquired as to what would cause him to smile while being put to death. Akiva's response summarizes the devotion of the Ancient Israelites to the Shema. His entire life, he focused on how he would be able to keep His part of the covenant with Yahweh to love Him with all of his heart and soul. While being put to death and praying to Yahweh, he finally discovered that he was able to love Yahweh with all of his soul even while he was being put to death. Akiva believed he was to die for the purpose of keeping God's name and commandments holy.¹

Biblical Perspective - A Study of Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Although the Shema is recited at times where a person may be close to death, the Ancient Hebrew prayer does not take on a morbid undertone. The idea of the Shema is to remain aware of the unity of God and the affirmation of covenant love toward him. Principles laid out in the Shema consequently influenced all aspects of Jewish life from religion, to education, and business affairs. Whether rich or poor Jewish education was nonnegotiable. Study of Ancient Jewish culture reveals that even if a person was poor, they would teach their children to read and write for the purpose of being able to follow God's Law and recite their holy prayers.² [692,

¹ Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*, 144. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

² Ibid., 692

Jewish Literacy] The research provided will seek to uncover what the significance and implications of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) for Judaism today.

Biblical Perspective - A Study of Deuteronomy 6:4-9

The reading of the Shema exemplifies the daily infusion of spirituality in the life of the observant Jew for the purpose of serving as a paradigm of the spirituality and law in Judaism. The goal is to integrate the Shema into the central role of Jewish life and thought. The overarching idea of Deuteronomy 6:4 is the meaning of “hear” and when verses Deuteronomy 6:5-9 is applied it is the basic statement of the Jewish law. The Shema became for the people of God a confession of faith by which they acknowledged the one true God and His commandments for them. Later worship practice combined Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41 into the larger Shema as the summary of Jewish confession.³ The Shema represents the greatest commandment of Judaism and Christianity, as it represents God’s expectation that God’s people will remain wholly loyal to him.

The Jewish Principles that are revealed within the Shema include: Monotheism, Loving God, Teaching Judaism to one’s children, Tefillin, Mezuzah, Reward and Punishment, and Tzotzil.⁴ The declaration “Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God is one Yahweh” (Deuteronomy 6:4). *Shema* comes from the first Hebrew word of the verse, Shema, “hear”. Verses 4–9 make up the whole of this foundational biblical truth. While several translations of verse 4 are grammatically correct, the Lord’s words in Mark 12:29 correspond most closely to the one given above.

³ Brand, C., Draper, C., England, A., Bond, S., Clendenen, E. R., & Butler, T. C. (Eds.). [Shema](#). In *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1481. (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003).

⁴ Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*, 735. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

Religious Jews recite the Shema three times daily as part of their devotional life. At the same time, no Sabbath worship is conducted in the synagogue without its proclamation.

Within the Shema is found both a fundamental doctrinal truth and a covenant obligation. There is an urgency connected to the teaching: the word Shema demands that the hearer respond with his total being to the fact and demands of this essential revelation.

In retrospect to the teaching pertaining to the nature of God, the word “one” (*echad*) designates a compound unity rather than an absolute singular. The same term *echad* was used in Genesis 2:24: Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.⁵ The compound singular word for “one” first occurs in Genesis 2:24 where a man and woman, though separate entities, are seen to be one (*echad*) in marriage. Understandably, Jesus could freely quote Deuteronomy 6:4 without infringing upon the truth of his own deity. It is important for Christians to recognize that the doctrine of the Triune Nature of God is by no means in conflict with the vigorous monotheism of the Shema.

Although the Shema teaches that God is a unity within himself, its primary thrust affirms the absolute uniqueness of Yahweh: there simply are no gods in addition to him. Jesus reiterated this when he said, “He is one, and there is none other but he” (Mk 12:32). This being the case, man is obligated to love the sole deity with all of his heart, soul, and strength (Dt 6:5). Moses clearly taught that to acknowledge other deities is both a grievous sin against the Lord and a denial of the unique covenant of redemption.

While the entire message of the Scripture is built upon the Shema, the Bible leaves no doubt that man is unable to love God in the way he should. Because of his fallen, sinful nature, man’s heart is desperately corrupt (Jeremiah 17:9). It was altogether fitting and necessary, therefore, that the Son of God should obey the demands of the Shema on behalf of fallen man. The

⁵ *The New King James Version*. Genesis 2:24. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

all-encompassing love for God required by the Law found perfect expression in our representative before the Father, the sinless Messiah.

Having fulfilled God’s requirements on man’s behalf, Jesus enables his disciples to relate to the Shema in a vital and meaningful way. Moses wrote of a time when God, having circumcised the hearts of his people, would enable them to love him with all their hearts (Deutoronmy 30:6). Under the provisions of the new covenant and spiritual rebirth, an inward change of heart makes the Shema a delight and not a burden.⁶

Parents are to rehearse the laws of God to their children. The Shema presumes that teachers know their content, which in turn presumes concentrated effort and study. The overall purpose is for the Word of God to not only be recited and heard, but also to become applied as a basis of knowledge for life. The only way presumably to maintain the level of command on the Shema necessitated in the Scripture was to place it around places where Jewish people frequent. The Scriptures also command the Shema is bound to a person’s body as well.

Jewish Interpretations and Traditions

Jews recite the Shema in the morning and the evening . Synagogue recitations are followed by Deuteronomy 11:13–21 (regarding rewards for obedience and punishments for disobedience of the commandments) and Numbers 15:37–41 (details about clothing tassels used as reminders to keep the commandments).⁷ Israelites recited their creed, the Shema, twice a day in line with Deuteronomy 6:7, “talk of them when you lie down, and when you rise” (ESV). In the book of Daniel, Daniel’s practice of praying three times a day may have led to the three times

⁶ Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). [Shema, The](#). In *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible* (Vol. 2, pp. 1945–1946). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

⁷ Huffman, D. S., & Hausherr, J. N. (2016). [Shema, the](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

daily recitation of the Shema, though it also coincides with the times set for the daily sacrifices. While the rabbis preferred that the people recite the Shema in Hebrew, Jews in areas outside Judaea, where Greek was more readily spoken, used the Septuagint form⁸ Jewish law ruled over two thousand years ago that parents are forbidden to live in a city without schools. Talmudic Law even said that no teacher was to be assigned more than 25 students and if the class was larger an additional teacher must be brought in.⁹ The emphasis on education was for the purpose of understanding God’s law regardless of socioeconomic conditions a child was born. Whereas in current educational structures in Western Civilization afford a more premium education to the person who may have access to financial resources than the person who may not be as privileged to ascertain.

The Shema contains within specific instructions for the purpose of complementing the traditions held within the Torah. Deuteronomy 6:8 is where the Tefilin is indicated within scripture, “Tie them as a sign on your forearm.” Later Jewish tradition referred to the little leather containers tied to the forearms and foreheads as tefillin. They were to contain the following passages from the Torah: Exodus 13:1–10, 11–16; Deuteronomy 6:5–9; 11:13–21. The purpose was to serve as a “sign” of covenant relationship and obedience. These box-like containers, like those on the forearms, held the same scraps of the Torah. It was the hypocritical practice of wearing these without heartfelt sincerity that caused Jesus to speak scathingly about them¹⁰ Frontlets (Hebrew totafot) implies the Jewish man should bind the words upon his hand and between his eyes.

⁸ Hardin, L. T. [Prayer](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016)

⁹ Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*, 692. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

¹⁰ Biblical Studies Press. *The NET Bible First Edition Notes* (Dt 6:8). (Biblical Studies Press, 2006)

The Mezuzah is the Hebrew term for “doorpost.” Ancient doors pivoted on posts set in sockets. The blood of the Passover lamb was to be applied to doorposts (Exodus 12:7, 22–23). At the beginning of the new year, blood was to be applied to the doorposts of the temple to make atonement for it. The command to write the words of the Shema on the doorposts of one’s home, like the command to write them on one’s heart, is a challenge to remember always that love of God is central to faith. As one enters the home, the Shema dictacted the flow and nature of the home. Every room in the house (besides the bathroom) had a mezuzah on the doorpost. The first order of business when a Jewish person establishes a new dwelling was to display the mezuzah. When a person left their home and looked at the doorpost, it reminded them of the character that was expected of them amongst all of those they would come in contact with in the world. At a later time, these commands were understood literally.

Conclusion

Today, mezuzah refers to small scrolls inscribed with Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21 placed in a container attached to the door posts of some Jewish homes.¹¹ Daily Shema recitation had been established by the Mishnah time period¹², and there is evidence of this practice in New Testament times mentioning priests reciting the Shema in temple service and alluding to the Shema. Rabbinic debates in the Talmudic period include questions of when the Shema could be recited and the proper posture for reciting it. Jewish boys are to be taught the Shema as soon as they can speak and it is to be recited at the end of one’s life.¹³ One such tradition was the daily

11 Brand, C., Draper, C., England, A., Bond, S., Clendenen, E. R., & Butler, T. C. (Eds.). (2003). [Mezuzah](#). In *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (p. 1117). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

12 Huffman, D. S., & Hausherr, J. N. (2016). [Shema, the](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

13 Huffman, D. S., & Hausherr, J. N. (2016). [Shema, the](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

recitation of the Shema, which was important not only in Jesus' praying, but in His teaching that the entire Law stemmed from its principles¹⁴ The daily recitation of the Shema occurs in three different times during the day: shakharit (morning), minkha (afternoon service), and ma'ariv (evening).¹⁵

The Shema serves as the basis for not only Judaism but also Christianity today. When Jesus addressed the lawyer who questioned Him about the Great Commandment, His response was in reference to the outward expression of the desire of God to see the Shema lived out. When one understands the principle of unity laid out within Deuteronomy 6:4, this will serve as the foundation for unity with God and with man. The essence of man to know how to love God with all of one's heart, soul, and body is displayed in loving our neighbor as we love our self. It is impossible to love a God we cannot see yet hate someone we see every day. The Shema is geared to influence a person's behavior in the home in how their life is conducted within their family. As the Shema is prayed consistently, the goal of the Shema will also influence a person's behavior toward those who are outside of the house. To display unity among all fulfills the nature and purpose of the Shema.

¹⁴ Hardin, L. T. (2016). [Prayer](#). In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, ... W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

¹⁵

Telushkin, Rabbi Joseph. *Jewish Literacy: The Most Important Things to Know About the Jewish Religion, Its People, and Its History*, 715. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001).

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