

Sh'ma: A Re-creation

Loving life and its mysterious source with all our heart and all our spirit, all our senses and strength, we take upon ourselves and into ourselves these promises: to care for the earth and those who live upon it, to pursue justice and peace, to love kindness and compassion. We will teach this to our children throughout the passage of the day—as we dwell in our homes and as we go on our journeys, from the time we rise until we fall asleep. And may our actions be faithful to our words that our children’s children may live to know: Truth and kindness have embraced, peace and justice have kissed and are one.

—MARCIA FALK

Love

Judaism commands love, for its goal is to teach human beings to love.

—ERIC L. FRIEDLAND

You Shall Love

“You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all that is yours.” You shall love—what a paradox this embraces! Can love then be commanded? . . . Yes of course, love cannot be commanded. No third party can command it or extort it. No third party can, but the One can. The commandment to love can only proceed from the mouth of the lover.

—FRANZ ROSENZWEIG

Recitation of the Sh'ma

Some people may wish to pause here for a moment. Some may close their eyes; others may place a hand over their eyes. The intention is to concentrate on our relationship with God’s oneness. In the absence of a minyan, we add the following: God is a faithful sovereign.

Hear, O Israel, ADONAI is our God, ADONAI is one.

Sh'ma yisrael, Adonai eloheinu, Adonai ehad.

Recited quietly: Praised be the name of the one whose glorious sovereignty is forever and ever.

You shall love ADONAI your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all that is yours.

These words that I command you this day shall be taken to heart.

Teach them again and again to your children; speak of them when you sit in your home, when you walk on your way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

Bind them as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol above your eyes; inscribe them upon the doorposts of your home and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4–9

V'ahavta et Adonai elohekha b'khol l'vav'kha u-v'khol nafsh'kha u-v'khol me'odekha. V'hayu ha-d'varim ha-eileh asher anokhi m'tzav'kha hayom al l'avvekha. V'shinantam l'vanekha v'dibarta bam, b'shivt'kha b'veitekha u-v'lekht'kha va-derekh u-v'shokhb'kha u-v'kumekha. U-k'shartam l'ot al yadekha v'hayu l'totafot bein einekha. U-kh'tavtam al mezuzot beitekha u-visharekha.

קריאת שמע

Some people may wish to pause here for a moment. Some may close their eyes; others may place a hand over their eyes. The intention is to concentrate on our relationship with God’s oneness. In the absence of a minyan, we add the following: אל מלך נאמן.

שמע ישראל יהוה אלהינו יהוה אחד.

ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד. Recited quietly.

ואהבת את יהוה אלהיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך ובכל מאדך: והיו הדברים האלה אשר אנכי מצוך היום על לבבך: ושננתם לבניך ודברתם בם בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך: וקשרתם לאות על ידך והיו לטטפת בין עיניך: וכתבתם על מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך:

דברים ו:ד-ט

words, the Sh'ma is recited twice daily, in both the evening and in the morning.

HEAR שמע. Seeing emphasizes the external; hearing, the internal. We are asked to internalize our experience of God. The point is emphasized by the custom of covering one’s eyes during the recitation of the Sh'ma.

ONE אחד. As an affirmation about God, the word ehad can be understood in multiple ways. This translation emphasizes the unity of God. Some translate ehad as “unique,” emphasizing God’s otherness and singularity. Still others translate it as “alone,” emphasizing Judaism’s monotheistic claim.

Mystic commentators expand the meaning of “one,” interpreting it as describing the unity of heaven and earth, saying that we are ultimately all part of the One. In a similar vein, some rabbinic authorities recommended that when reciting the Sh'ma, one should meditate on all four directions, as well as above and below, in acknowledgment that God is everywhere (Babylonian Talmud, Berakhot 13b).

PRAISED BE THE NAME שם ברוך. According to the Mishnah, when God’s name was pronounced by the High Priest on Yom Kippur, the people would respond, “Praised be the name . . .” (Yoma 3:8). Since this is a response but not part of the biblical text, it is normally not recited out loud, in order not to interrupt the flow of biblical verses—though the memory of how it was recited in the Temple remains with us in a whisper.

YOU SHALL LOVE ואהבת. Repeatedly the Torah instructs us to love: to love God, to love our neighbor, and to love the stranger. We might well take the word “love” to imply an intense inner emotion, but the ancient rabbis frequently understood the biblical injunction to “love” in a more concrete and behavioral sense: love consists of acts of empathy, care, and kindness as well as behavior toward others that is just and righteous. To love God is certainly to recognize our conscious relationship to God. Equally, it may mean that we behave in ways that are pleasing to God—acting morally and fulfilling what God desires of us, to walk through life lovingly.

THE SH'MA. The Sh'ma comprises three paragraphs from the Torah, selected because they express basic Jewish beliefs and behaviors. According to the ancient rabbis, the first of the three paragraphs proclaims recognition of the sovereignty of heaven, עול מלכות שמים (ol malkhut shamayim); the second speaks to our behavior, עול מצוות (ol mitzvot); and the third reminds us of the exodus, יציאת מצרים (y'tzi-at mitzrayim), our primary sacred story.

Because the first paragraph itself commands us to speak these words when we lie down and when we arise, and the second paragraph repeats these very

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