



The Shema as a Declaration of Love

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The Shema appears in Parashat Va'Ethanan, located between verses offering guidance about how to live in the Promised Land. But as a prayer in our liturgy, the Shema is not connected to the preparation to enter the Land of Israel. What might it mean in the context of our prayers?

The first challenge is to understand what the six words of Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) might mean. The verse is ambiguous (perhaps intentionally so¹) and difficult to translate.

Perhaps the Shema is articulating “the requirement that Israel worship only one God (e.g., ‘Yhwh is our God, Yhwh alone’).”² In this view the Shema is a credo, expressing our belief in God and no others. In the words of Rashbam:

¹ See Benjamin Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 221, n. 52, end.

² Sommer, p. 220, n. 52. Sommer offers a second understanding: “The indivisible nature of [God] (e.g., ‘Yhwh our God is one Yhwh,’ or ‘Yhwh our God – Yhwh is one’”). He notes that both are possible, and neither explanation perfectly fits the Hebrew words. Compare the four options offered by Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, (New Haven: Yale, 1991), p. 337.



Rashbam on Deuteronomy 6:4**רשב"ם דברים ו:ד**

“YHVH is one”—we will worship Him alone, and will not join to Him another god.³ ה' אחד - לו לבדו נעבוד ולא נצרף עמו אלוה אחר.

However, if this were the sole purpose of the Shema, one would have expected the verse to end with the word “לבדו - alone.”⁴ What is the significance of the word “אחד - one”?

In rabbinic understanding, the word אחד is relational, not only numerical. It serves to advance the idea that we only worship God by developing our special relationship to God. In this view, the Shema is not a description of the nature of God in the universe, or an ode to monotheism, but rather a claim about God’s connection to us.

In one line of rabbinic interpretation, that relationship is expressed through God’s declaration of love for us:

Mekhilta Massekhta de-Kaspa 20, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, p. 334⁵**מכילתא מסכתא דכספא פרשה כ**

Why did Scripture write: “YHVH is one (אחד)” to teach that God particularly directed (ייחד) God’s name to us. ומה תלמוד לומר "י-י אחד", אלא עלינו ייחד שמו ביותר.

Here the word אחד is seen as a verb, in which God singularly directed (ייחד) God’s love to the Jewish people.⁶ The Shema is telling Israel to listen to the fact that God singled them out to love them.

³ See also Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 6:4.

⁴ Compare to Deuteronomy 4:35; see Sommer, p. 220.

⁵ Compare the translation in ed. Lauterbach, vol. 3, p. 184. Compare also the parallel phrase that Israel does concerning God’s name by reciting Shema, quoted in the Musaf Amidah: המייחדין שמו. A similar phrase appears in the blessing before the Shema: וליחדך באהבה.

⁶ The word אחד may be connected to the word for joy, חדוה, which has similar associations with the word “אהבה - love.” In Bavli Ketubot 8a, חדוה and אהבה are used as synonyms in the blessing of bride and groom.



Other rabbinic texts flesh out this relational understanding in the opposite direction, with Israel declaring the Shema as an expression of its love for God. These texts imagine a parallel set of *tefillin* worn by the Jewish people and God. In the *tefillin* of the Jewish people, we place a scroll with the verse of Shema written on it. But, according to the Talmud, God also wears *tefillin*. What is written in God's *tefillin*? A different six-word verse, parallel to the six words of Shema:

Talmud Bavli Berakhot 6a

תלמוד בבלי ברכות ו.

Rav Naḥman bar Yitzḥak said to R. Hiyya bar Avin: The *tefillin* of the Master of the Universe, what is written in it? He replied: "Who is like you Israel, one nation in the land" (I Chronicles 17:21).

אמר ליה רב נחמן בר יצחק לרב חייא בר אבין: הני תפילין דמרי עלמא מה כתיב בהו? אמר ליה: "ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ" (דברי הימים א יז:כא).

Both of these verses, Deuteronomy 6:4 and I Chronicles 17:21, use the word אחד. But in I Chronicles 17:21, the word אחד is not being used to indicate how many nations there are in the world—there are obviously more than one! Rather, it is an evocation of the relationship: God, in praising Israel, calls them one, as in the modern phrase: 'You are my one and only.'⁷ Similarly, Israel, in calling God one in the Shema, expresses its love for God.

Indeed, a different rabbinic tradition views Israel as calling out the six words of Shema, while God calls out in parallel the six words of I Chronicles 17:21.⁸ These verses are not counting beings (God is one, Israel is one), but rather they are a type of love song based on the singular focus of each party on the other. This understanding of these verses is expressed in the following *midrash* (also found on Berakhot 6a):

⁷ My thanks to Prof. Stephen Geller for this understanding of the text.

⁸ Mekhilta Shirah 3, ed. Horowitz-Rabin, p. 126. Compare the *midrash* printed in Louis Ginzberg, *Ginzei Schechter* (New York: JTS, 1928), vol. 1, p. 121, explicating the verse, "I am my beloved, and my beloved is mine," with the parallel recitation of these two verses by God and Israel.



The Holy Blessed One said to Israel... “You made me a singular object of love in the world, as it says: ‘Listen Israel, YHVH our God, YHVH is one.’ And I will make you a singular object of love in the world, as it says: ‘Who is like you Israel, one nation in the land.’”⁹

אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא לישראל... אתם עשיתוני חטיבה אחת בעולם, שנאמר: שמע ישראל ה' אלקינו ה' אחד. ואני אעשה אתכם חטיבה אחת בעולם, שנאמר: ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ.

God and Israel each make the other a uniquely loved entity (חטיבה).¹⁰ Israel employs the six words of the Shema in order to express this love.

The idea that the six words of Shema express love is strengthened by the verse that follows Deuteronomy 6:4. Indeed, that next verse instructs Israel to love God (ואהבת את ה' אלוך). In the liturgy, this expression of Israel's love for God is preceded by God's declaration of love for Israel. The blessing preceding Shema in the morning concludes:

Blessed are You, YHVH, who chooses His people Israel with love.¹¹

ברוך אתה ה' הבוחר בעמו ישראל באהבה.

God's choosing Israel is an expression of God's love for Israel.¹² That love is instantiated by God's giving us the gift of the Torah, as described in that blessing.¹³ “The teaching [of the Torah] is evidence of God's love... the framework for our love of God is God's love of us.”¹⁴

⁹ See also Bavli Hagigah 3a.

¹⁰ For the translation “object of love” see Jastrow's *Dictionary*, p. 449. See also Shmuel Krauss, “Israel ein einziges Gebilde auf der welt,” *MGWJ* 54 (1910), pp. 44-54.

¹¹ For variations of this line, including the simple: אוהב את ישראל, see Reuven Kimelman, “‘We Love the God Who Loved Us First’: The Second Blessing of the Shema Liturgy,” in Isaac Kalimi (ed.), *Bridging between Sister Religions: Studies of Jewish and Christian Scriptures Offered in Honor of Prof. John T. Townsend* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), p. 245, n. 22. Compare the evening blessing preceding Shema: “אוהב עמו ישראל - who loves His people Israel.”

¹² See Kimelman, “We Love the God Who Loved Us First,” p. 241.

¹³ This similarly appears in the blessing before reading from the Torah: “Blessed are You YHVH, king of the universe, who chose (בחר) us from among the nations by giving us the Torah.” Note how God's choosing Israel is expressed through the giving of the Torah. See further, Kimelman, “We Love the God Who Loved Us First,” p. 241.

¹⁴ Kimelman, “We Love the God Who Loved Us First,” pp. 246, 258.



Thus the structure of the liturgical unit of Shema runs: (1) God loves Israel (blessing before Shema); (2) Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4)—an expression of God uniting with Israel, and Israel loving God; (3) Israel instructed to love God (6:5).¹⁵ As Reuven Kimelman writes: “Only a loving God can demand love.”¹⁶ Israel’s love, demanded by God, is expressed through observing the commandments God has given in the Torah (6:6).¹⁷

If the Shema is intended as an expression of love, how are we meant to recite it? First, it has to be said aloud; one cannot recite the Shema in one’s head (Mishnah Berakhot 2:3).¹⁸ Just as saying “I love you” means nothing unless it is said out loud to the lover, so, too, the Shema must be expressed out loud through one’s voice.

Moreover, one *midrash* envisions how Israel must recite the Shema in unison:

Shir HaShirim Rabbah 8:11¹⁹

“O you who dwell in the garden, friends (*haverim*) are listening; let me hear your voice” (Song of Songs 8:13).

Another explanation... When Israel enters the synagogue and reads the Shema with intention in one voice and one melody, the Holy One says to those sitting in the garden:

שיר השירים רבה (וילנא) ח:יא

"היושבת בגנים חברים מקשיבים לקולך
השמיעני" (שיר השירים ח:יג)...

דבר אחר... כשישראל נכנסין לבתי כנסיות
וקורין קריאת שמע בכיוון הדעת, בקול אחד
בדעה וטעם אחד, הקב"ה אומר להם

¹⁵ For this parallel love, see Midrash Tehillim 116:1, ed. Buber, p. 238b. In that *midrash*, God declares: “You love Me, and I love you.”

¹⁶ Kimelman, “We Love the God Who Loved Us First,” p. 260.

¹⁷ As recited in the blessing before Shema: “לשמור ולעשות את כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה” - to keep and do all the words of Your Torah with love.” The second paragraph of Shema is the explicit acceptance of the *mitzvot*, according to Mishnah Berakhot 2:2.

¹⁸ Although later authorities reported practices both to recite the three paragraphs of Shema out loud or silently, the Rema notes that at least the first line of Shema must be said aloud. See Rema Orach Hayyim 61:26.

¹⁹ See also Ginsburg, *Ginzei Schechter*, vol. 1, p. 120.



“When you read connected (*haverim* read as *haburim*), I and My court ‘listen to your voice, let Me hear it’ (8:13).” But when Israel reads Shema without intention, one advancing and one behind, and recite the Shema without intention, the Holy Spirit screams and says: “My lover has escaped” (8:14).

היושבת בגנים, כשאתם קורין חברים אני
ופמליא שלי מקשיבים לקולך השמיעני,
אבל כשישראל קורין קריאת שמע בטירוף
הדעת, זה מקדים וזה מאחר ואינם מכוונים
דעתם בקריאת שמע, רוח הקדש צוחת
ואומרת: "ברח דודי"

This *midrash* plays on the final two verses of the Song of Songs. When Israel is unified in their expression of the Shema, then God wants to hear it. But when Israel recites the phrase out of sync with each other, one person saying it faster and another slower, then God, as it were, runs from this moment. The point of the out-loud expression of Shema is to declare our love in unison.

This image adds another layer to the expression of loving God in the Shema. This love is related to the feeling and connection we have with the others in the room with us, all expressing our love for God together. There is nothing quite like hearing voices in prayer reciting something in unison, with all the power that exists in that moment of expression. And we rely on each other for that moment.²⁰ My love of God is not ultimately independent of other people’s love of God; we have to join together for it truly to be expressed.

When I cover my eyes and say the Shema, I try to connect to the relational nature of the expression, feeling God’s love (as expressed through the giving of the Torah) and offering my love in return (as expressed by performing the *mitzvot*). I feel connected to the others in the room who are reciting this phrase along with me. I am not looking to describe the nature of

²⁰ Although the Shema can be recited by an individual, the ancient responsive recitation of Shema, known as פורס את שמע or פורס על שמע, required a *minyan*. See Mishnah Megillah 4:3 and Reuven Kimelman, “The Shema Liturgy: From Covenant Ceremony to Coronation,” *Kenishta* 1 (2001), pp. 92-97.



God, or to make a claim about the number of true deities in the world. Rather, I am seeking to draw closer to the God who loves Israel.

