

The Shema

(You say Sh'mah)

The **Shema** is one of the most important Jewish prayers. It is one of the first prayers that Jewish children learn. Religious Jews say the Shema three times each day as part of their regular prayers, and it is included in almost every synagogue service.

The Shema reminds Jews that:

- There is only one God.
- God is good and loves them and they should love Him.
- God's rules are good and they should love them, too.
- God's rules apply to every part of a person's life.
- They should teach their Children about God's rules.

The Hebrew word **Shema** means **hear** or **listen**. The prayer has three paragraphs; each paragraph is a short passage from the Torah.

Here is the English translation of the first paragraph.

Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.

Blessed is His name, whose glorious kingdom is forever and ever.

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might. These words that I command you today shall be upon your heart. Repeat them to your children and talk about them when you sit in your home, and when you walk in the street; when you lie down, and when you rise up. Hold fast to them as a sign upon your hand and let them be as reminders before your eyes. Write them on the doorposts of your home and at your gates.

Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

"**These words**" in the second line means the Torah, which tells Jews about God's rules.

Jewish people believe that they have made a Covenant (it means a "deal") with God. The Covenant is an agreement that the people will love God and follow His rules, and in return God will take care of them. Saying the Shema is a way that Jewish people have of reminding themselves of their promises to God.

The second paragraph of the Shema promises long life and good harvests to those who keep God's rules. The third paragraph tells Jews to wear clothes with a **Tzitzit** at each corner. Tzitziot (more than one tzitzit) are tassels made of several threads tied together. The Shema says that when people look at the tassels they will remember their promise to keep God's rules. Some Jewish people follow this rule all the time and wear a sort of vest with tassels at the corners. Jewish people also wear a special prayer shawl called a **Tallit** when they are praying in the synagogue. A tallit has four corners with a tzitzit threaded through a hole in each corner.

Another way that Jewish people have of reminding themselves about the covenant is to fix a rolled up copy of the Shema, handwritten on parchment by an expert scribe, to each door frame of their homes. These copies are called **mezuzot** (one is called a **mezuzah**). To protect them, mezuzot are always put inside little boxes which are often beautifully decorated.

The word *mezuzah* is Hebrew for *doorpost*.

- The second paragraph of the Shema is *Deuteronomy 11: 13-21*
 - The third paragraph is *Numbers 15:37-41*
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Questions to Discuss

- What do you think it means when the Shema says "These words [...] shall be upon your heart"?
- Where in the Shema does it tell Jews to talk to each other about God's rules?
- Why do you think the Shema says that people should repeat the words to their children?
- Could it be boring to keep talking about the rules?
- What could you use or do to help you to remember promises that you have made?

Teachers' Notes

The Shema can be thought of as the Jewish **Statement of Faith** and plays a somewhat similar role for Jews as the Lord's Prayer does for Christians. Religious Jews will recite the Shema on waking and before sleeping (ie *when you lie down, and when you rise up*). Jewish children learn to recite the Shema as a bedtime prayer.