

The Hidden Meaning of the Shema

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There is a story about a rabbi who traveled through Europe after the Holocaust searching for Jewish children hidden in churches during the war. In one Catholic orphanage, the priest assured him there were none. The rabbi did not believe him but had no way to prove it. So he asked to watch the sisters put the children to bed that night, just to see how they were cared for. The priest agreed. As the nuns tucked the children in, the rabbi stood in the doorway and began to sing the Shema. Several of the children immediately began to cry for their parents, revealing that they were, in fact, Jewish. The story may be apocryphal, but it highlights just how foundational the Shema is to Jewish consciousness.

This week's portion, Va'et-hannan, is the very source of the Shema prayer. In studying the parashah, I found myself reading it with new eyes. During prayer it's easy to cruise through the words but studying them as text raised questions I'd never asked before.

Two questions jumped out at me. First, if the Shema is meant to remind us about the nature of God, why does it say "listen" rather than "look" or "see?" Second, what does the Hebrew Adonai Echad, "God is One," actually mean?

The nineteenth-century rabbi Adolf Altmann wrote:

"Sound stands nearest to the purely spiritual among the phenomena of the world of the senses. Therefore, God has chosen it to be the medium of sensory revelation. Since what is heard is the least dimensional, it is easier to imagine it as something unlimited, and extendable into infinity, than what is visible or tactile."

Sound has no edges. It cannot be held, weighed, or framed. It passes through walls and doorways and reaches even a child asleep in an orphanage, with only trace memories of their Jewish identity.

The historian Hans Kohn drew a similar contrast. The Greeks, he wrote, were "the people of sight, of the spatial..." But "the Jew did not see so much as he heard. . . His organ was the ear . . . When Elijah perceived God, he heard only a still, small voice."

No image. No statue. Only a voice, and the demand to listen to it.

Sight functions differently. It lets us draw conclusions quickly and viscerally from superficial attributes. Entire worldviews and prejudices can be built from a single glance. But the eye is also easily tricked. A person can be beautiful without being healthy. Something can be shiny without being valuable. Our eyes are easily seduced into idolatry, a false belief that something has more meaning than it actually does.

This understanding of the power of hearing opens up a new understanding of the Shema. While an image might be worth a thousand words, truth is found only through deeper, more nuanced engagement. Hearing is a tool for understanding people, politics, and values far beyond what a glance can reveal, a powerful reminder in a world of Instagram and TikTok that captures more images of us than at any point in human history. We need to guard against assuming that seeing is the only tool we have for discerning truth.

The second half of the verse is no simpler. Adonai Echad has been translated in markedly different ways, and the sages devoted considerable attention to what it means.

For Rashi (11th century, France), it is less a statement about God's present state than an aspiration: a future when God's unity is recognized by all and brings humanity together. For Rashbam (12th century, France), it is simpler still: Echad expresses exclusivity, a covenantal claim that this God, and no other, is the one to whom

Israel is bound. Rambam (12th century, Spain/Egypt) takes it further: God's oneness is unlike any we can conceive of, not a matter of counting to one, but a unity with no comparison in creation.

The interpretation that inspires me most comes from Hasidic thought. Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (1749–1821) in *Nefesh HaHayyim* puts it starkly: "There is no other than the Divine must be taken literally: there is nothing at all in the worlds . . . all is filled with the simple essence of God's oneness."

God, in other words, is not confined to the heavens. God is in the blades of grass in a field, in the force of a thunderstorm, in an act of human courage, in the love shared between two people. Scholars call this conception of God Hasidic immanentism.

Understood this way, the Shema is not simply the assertion most of us grew up with, that Jews believe in one God rather than many. It is a claim that God is anywhere and everywhere, and that widens the prayer's meaning considerably. If God is present in everything, the implications are moral and environmental: to hurt or diminish another person is to hurt or diminish God's presence in the world, and to pollute or damage the earth is to dim God's light within it.

What I love about approaching the Shema this way is that even though the prayer is so familiar, studying it closely reveals new meaning and amplifies its power today. When we say the Shema, we are not only asserting the essential Jewish belief in one God. We are reminding ourselves that our eyes cannot be our only tools for understanding (especially in a world of screens, Instagram, and TikTok); we must also listen deeply to others, to our past, and to our own hearts. And when we proclaim that God is one, we are asserting that in order to embody that statement by acting as if we really believe that each and every person and the world in which we live are all connected and all extensions of the Divine. All of sudden, gossip, discrimination, dishonesty, careless use of resources, and damage to the natural world are values that are now as central as Judaism's commitment to one God.

As we recite the Shema this week and read it from the Torah, I hope it offers new meaning^l and a recommitment to the values that can help make our lives and our world better.

Shabbat shalom.