



THE SHEMA PERSPECTIVE

IF SOMEONE ASKED YOU TO SUGGEST JUST ONE BRIEF JEWISH PRAYER which they could say every day, the first paragraph of the Shema, which occurs in our Sedra¹, would be a very good candidate. It begins with the famous words *Shema Yisrael* - "Hear O Israel, the L-rd is our G-d, G-d is One". This one sentence expresses the essence of Jewish commitment.

In the lines which follow in the same paragraph we are asked to carry out several im-portant Commandments. Let us see what they are.

One is the study and teaching of Torah: "These words which I command you today shall be on your heart. You should teach them properly to your children, and you shall speak of them..." The Sages explain this means not just the words of the Shema, but words of the Torah in which the Shema is written, and indeed all Torah teachings. This law includes both making time and opportunities for Torah study for oneself and also for organising a Jewish education for one's children. It also in-cludes teaching Torah to other people, and caring about providing Jewish education for other people's children!

While in earlier generations most Jewish women did not share in the study and teaching of Torah, it has long been recognised that Torah study is essential for every individual. Women and girls teach, expound, translate and communicate Torah thought on the most subtle levels, together with men.

Another command in the Shema, which does apply specifically to

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men, is that Tefillin should be worn. “You shall bind them as a sign on your arm and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes”. The Tefillin contain the first and second² paragraphs of the Shema and two other consecutive paragraphs³ from the Torah. All these passages mention Tefilin. To put on Tefilin on a weekday, saying the appropriate blessings, and then to recite at least the Shema, is a key Jewish action for males. The Tefilin are placed on the head, representing the dedication of one’s thoughts and one’s mind to G-d; and on the left bicep, near the heart, expressing dedication of one’s feelings and passions to G-d. A woman does not herself wear Tefilin, but is included in the Mitzva by her husband – or even, comments the Lubavitcher Rebbe, by her future husband.

A third command is the Mezuzah: “And you shall write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates”. The Mezuzah too includes the first two paragraphs Shema, and of course applies to both men and women.

This first paragraph of the Shema emphasises the spiritual dimension of the Jewish man and woman. Each person is bonded to G-d through study of Torah and observance of distinctive Mitzvot such as Tefilin and Mezuzah. These help us achieve an awareness of the oneness of G-d, and feel a dedicated love of G-d, as taught in the first few lines of this special Jewish prayer: “and you should love G-d... with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your might”.

It is not surprising that the Shema is one of the texts from Deuteronomy (Devarim) which, once every seven years, the King would read to the Jewish people assembled in the Temple. This event, called Hakhel, expresses the unity of the Jewish people and the way that each person has the ability to draw inspiration from our teachers and leaders and also to give inspiration to others in turn⁴.

This year, now nearing its close, has been a year of Hakhel. The Shema provides the perspective on existence which we seek to acquire and to share, during the Hakhel year and always⁵. G-d is One, and His Torah and Mitzvot bring joy, fulfilment and love...

1. Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11. The first paragraph of the Shema is 6:4-9. 2. This is in next week’s Sedra: Deut. 11:13-21. 3. Exodus 13:1-10, 11-16. 4. See the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Iggrot Kodesh* vol.24, pp. 223, 331. 5. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol. 24 p.204.

Torah teachings are holy - please treat this page with care

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SEDRA VA'ETCHANAN

ECHO!!

It was one of those long, hot summer afternoons. Shira and Leah slumped back in their deck chairs, drunk with the heat. Leah sipped a glass of lemonade. Shira looked on as their little brother, Jacob, tried to build something out of wooden blocks.

Suddenly, Shira sat up in her chair. "I have an idea! Let's go spelunking!"

"Huh?" Leah rolled her eyes at her sister. "Did you make that up, Shira? What's *spelunking*?"

"It means that we'll go exploring caves. Daddy told me that there are caves in the mountains all around our summer home. Wouldn't that be cool?! And also *cool*?" Shira grinned as she dramatically fanned her face with her hands.

Twenty minutes later, Shira and Leah, who held onto Jacob's hand, were standing on the side of a hill. In front of them was the dark opening to a cave.

"I think we found one," Leah whispered. The sisters looked at each other and at the same time, reached for the other's hand.

“Here goes nothing,” Shira murmured, and the three of them stepped into the cave.

“I can’t see anything!!!!” Jacob’s voice sounded loud in the darkness. “I can’t see anything, I can’t see, I can’t see, see, see...” Jacob’s voice bounced back at them. He held on tighter to his sister’s hand.

“Echo! Echo! Echo!” Shira called loudly. Her words bounced off the walls of the cave: “Echo! Echo! Echo!”

Then the girls burst out laughing, and Jacob joined in with his giggles. The cave started laughing too.

“I learned about this,” Leah whispered. “In science class. The walls of the cave can’t absorb the sound of our voices, so the sound bounces off. That’s why we hear them again and again.”

Leah, Shira, and Jacob stepped out of the cool cave into the blinding sun.

“That’s amazing, Leah! I learned in this Sedra, that at Mount Sinai, there was no echo at all. That means that there was nothing in the world that could not absorb the sound of G-d’s voice! That means that since Mount Sinai, even the physical world is steeped with the sounds of Torah.”

Jacob tugged at Leah’s hand and pointed towards the cave. “Echo, echo...” he repeated.

Leah laughed. “I think we have some more spelunking to do,” she said. “But we will need torches. And in the cave, we will say something from the Torah, and this time it *will* echo..”

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