

## 5 ways to pray the Sh'ma

*Sh'ma Yisrael. Adonai Eloheinu. Adonai ehad.* (Deut. 6:4)  
Literally: Hear Israel | the Lord | our God | the Lord | one

This passage is known as the *Sh'ma* ('Hear'). Followed by the *V'ahavta* ('You shall love...' *6:5-9*), it is a faith statement central to Jewish worship, impressing upon the hearer what it means to be in a relationship with the one, almighty, living God: a total commitment of life. As shown below, classic interpretations of the Hebrew reveal variant meanings—like rays of light sparkling from a single diamond. Some would say that the depth at which this text resonates in one's soul allows for interpretative possibilities which are divinely limitless.

1. *"The Lord is our God, and the Lord alone."*
2. *"The Lord is our God, one indivisible Lord."*
3. *"The Lord our God is a unique Lord."*
4. *"The Lord is our God, the Lord is unique [in extraordinariness]."*  
[Plaut, p.1210]
5. A precious story passed on in Jewish tradition is of the great Rabbi Akiva who suffered a martyr's death (138 CE). He died praying the *Sh'ma*, uttering the word *ehad* ('one') with his last breath. The *Sh'ma* has continued to reverberate on Jewish lips through history: in the home, in the synagogue, mornings, evenings, ...and in facing death.  
Pray the *Sh'ma* (6:4-9), slowly, with depth of feeling and commitment, as part of your prayer today.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 3:23—7:11

*Va-et'chanan:*  
'I pleaded'

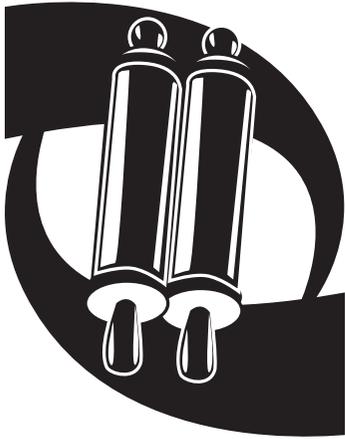
## Why reflect on Torah?

*"For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished" (Matthew 5:18, NRSV).*

As a faithful Jew, Jesus' life and teachings were firmly rooted in Torah. In order to understand more deeply our sacred scriptures and Jesus himself, we Christians can draw nourishment from the insights of the Jewish tradition, conscious of the historical, biblical and spiritual links between the two religions. As Pope John Paul II said during his visit to the Synagogue of Rome in 1986:

*"The Church of Christ discovers its 'links' with Judaism 'by pondering its own mystery'. The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain manner, it is 'intrinsic' to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with it which we do not have with any other religion."*

May this *Light of Torah* series encourage Catholic parishes and other Christian communities to a deeper appreciation of the irreplaceable witness of the Jewish people, and of how we can learn from traditional Jewish approaches to the bible.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Deuteronomy 3:23—7:11

As Moses continues his farewell discourse just outside the promised land, he reminds the Israelites of the momentous events on Mt Sinai when the Lord gave the Torah (the 'teaching', the 'law') and established a covenant with his people.

## Tasting Torah

*"Moses summoned all the Israelites and said to them: Hear O Israel, the laws and rules that I proclaim to you this day!"* (Deuteronomy 5:1)

What follows this verse is a repetition of the Decalogue ('Ten Commandments') given at Mt Sinai. Read this, along with Moses' added comments, in Chapter 5. As you do, place yourself in the biblical story: you are one of the new generation of Israelites preparing to enter the promised land. Your parents are dead, and Moses will soon die. At Sinai your parents had fled Egypt: the danger lay behind. Here, on the plains of Moab, an unknown future awaits you: the danger lies ahead. In what way does Moses' recitation of the Sinai teaching impact upon your heart and soul? Share your reflections with a friend.

## Touching Torah

*"It was not with our fathers that the Lord made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today"* (5:3).

Were you puzzled by the statement: 'not with our fathers'? Yet we know from the book of Exodus that the covenant was made with 'our fathers'! Perhaps you understood this statement as underlining the timelessness of the covenant. As the sages taught, and Jewish tradition continues to teach, the Torah was not given to only one generation of Israelites in one place; it was given to every Jew in every time and place.

## Depthing Torah

*"Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day"* (6:6).

Noting the word 'this day' ('today') in the verse above, the medieval Torah scholar Rashi comments on the present-day urgency of God's commandments:

*"They should not be in your eyes like an old edict to which a person does not attach importance, but rather, like a new one, towards which everybody runs."*

God's word is a *living* word, eternally fresh, relevant. It addresses the hearer in the 'now', calling for a response. The sages teach that this 'now' extends not only to obedience to the law but to the experiences of Sinai which can still be felt today. The biblical event has lost none of its flavor, its power to reveal God's glory and move us. In Jewish storytelling traditions it is said that at Sinai:

*"God's voice, as it was uttered, split up into seventy voices, in seventy languages, so that all the nations should understand"* (Exod. R. 5:9).

Originating as God's gift to Israel, the Torah goes forth to the nations. Says the prophet Isaiah: *"For instruction shall come forth from Zion, The word of the LORD from Jerusalem"* (2:3).

## Doing Torah

Ponder the vitality of Torah as understood by the Jewish sages, and as heard and felt in your own life as a 21st century Christian. Discuss practical ways to *live* this vitality in daily life, and to avoid staleness and complacency.



## Further reflections

A poignant scene is described in Deut. 3:23-28 where Moses begs the Lord to allow him to enter the promised land. Read these verses in *havrutah* (i.e., with one or more discussion partners) pondering:

- How uncharacteristic it is of Moses to pray for himself rather than others.
- The urgency of Moses. His death is near and he pleads with the Lord one last time.
- The pathos of the scene; Moses' humanity, vulnerability.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (London/NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006); Rashi: *Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: *NJPS*.