



5 ways to embrace the Shema

The *Shema*, a Jewish creedal statement, would have been recited regularly by Jesus, an observant Jew. Originally the *Shema* was just one verse (Deut. 6:4). In Jewish liturgy today, the *Shema* is recited as three scripture passages (Deut.6:4-9, 11:13-21 and Num.15:37-41). As Christians, how can we infuse our prayer lives with a deeper awareness of the *Shema*? Five ideas follow.

- 1. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone** (Deut.6:4). Reflect deeply on God's centrality in your life. Learn from a Jewish friend or colleague by asking about his/her understanding and experience of the *Shema*.
- 2. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...** (cf. Deut.6:5). Recite Deut.6:4-9 as you prepare to embrace a challenging task in life which requires whole-hearted faith, all your soul, all your might.
- 3. Keep these words in your heart. Recite them to your children, and talk about them when at home and away...** (Deut.6:6-7). Reflect on these verses as you go about your daily affairs, at home, at work, in the neighborhood... Teach your children Deut 6:4 and talk to them about its importance.
- 4. ...when you lie down and when you rise** (cf. Deut.6:7). In those last moments of consciousness before sleep, whisper the words of Deut.6:4.
- 5. And write them on the doorposts of your house** (Deut.6:9). Frame a copy of Deut.6:4, place it near your front door and recite it as you leave home in the morning. But don't leave the words at the door; take them to heart and allow them to influence your attitudes and decisions throughout the day.



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions.

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 3:23—7:11

*Va'etchanan:
'I pleaded'*

Why reflect on Torah?

"The church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginnings of its faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets."

(Nostra Aetate, 4)

With Vatican II the Church welcomed a renewed appreciation of its Jewish ancestry-in-faith. It acknowledged in a new way its ancient origins, that is, the faith of Israel: its scriptures, its traditions, its fidelity to the covenant. It affirmed the fact that Jews and Christians are linked by a shared spiritual and biblical heritage.

How natural, then, for us as Christians to turn to our Jewish brothers and sisters for insight and encouragement as we reflect on the scriptures we have in common. This week's *Light of Torah* leaflet offers a good example. We meet a significant passage in our bible which has daily prominence for observant Jews, but which we can tend to overlook in our day-to-day prayer lives.

Light of Torah, offers a way for Christians to reflect on Torah, enriched by the interpretative insights of Judaism.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 3:23—7:11

Our Torah reflection today focuses on Deut.6:4-9, a passage which finds a central place in Jewish liturgy. The first verse (6:4), known as the *Shema* (meaning 'Listen' or 'hear'), is perhaps the most frequently recited verse by Jews in the whole bible. In the prayer life of an observant Jew it is recited twice a day, morning and evening.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2003); www.jewishencyclopedia.com; www.aish.com. Scripture: *NRSV* (unless indicated otherwise).

Tasting Torah

Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone (Deut.6:4, *NRSV*).

Listen, Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one (Deut.6:4, see Friedman).

Read both these translations a few times, aloud, slowly. How does God's Word speak to your heart in an initial reading?

Touching Torah

The Book of Deuteronomy is presented as a series of speeches by Moses, just prior to his death, as he looks back and tells the story of the Israelites' epic trek through the desert. Those events are over. The Israelites are about to enter the promised land. All that remains is the memory of the desert events and the meaning of them. All that remains are the words that remind us of the wilderness story and the commandments to be fulfilled. And so, says Moses, '*Listen...*' Can we sense the drama, the power of this word, and all that hinges on it?

The fluidity of the Hebrew language allows for the latter part of v.4 to be translated as either 'The Lord alone' or 'The Lord is one.' Thus two key emphases emerge: Israel's sole worship of God and the oneness of God.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart (6:5). Commentators note that, reflecting the language of ancient political treaties, the verb 'to love' implies not just an emotion but the commitment of one's actions. To love God calls for total loyalty and dedication.

Depthing Torah

"Which commandment is the first of all?" asks a scribe in Mark's Gospel. Jesus answers by quoting the *Shema*: "*Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one...*" (Mark 12:29).

Where else do we find echoes of the *Shema* in the New Testament? Can we hear, for instance, soundings of the *Shema* in the voice of the apostle Paul: "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist..." (1 Cor. 8:6). As Christians, our faith is built on a foundational belief in God's unchallenged sovereignty over, and loving care for, all creation. And where does that foundation originate? In the faith of the Jewish people, summed up in the *Shema*.

Doing Torah

Shema! 'Listen!' Discuss the centrality of listening in a life of prayer, of faith, of family, of love. What happens when we don't listen? Why is listening sometimes such a challenge?

Recall a recent time, even if just a moment, when you listened intently with your whole self. What gift came from that time?

"You shall love the Lord your God..." The sages of Israel wrestled with the question: if the *Shema* is a commandment, how is it possible to 'command' love? Should not one's love of God be marked by spontaneity? How would you enter this discussion? Note that in the context of Jewish liturgy the *Shema* is always preceded by a declaration of God's love.



Faith & Life

During World War II, hundreds of Jewish parents placed their infant children, for their own safety, into the care of non-Jewish families or monasteries. After the war, a concern for the Jewish community was to locate its 'lost' Jewish child-survivors, many now living in church-run institutions and too young to remember their Jewish upbringing. The story is told of one Rabbi who, with the permission of a Polish Catholic orphanage, greeted the children, then sang the words of the *Shema*, upon which a number of the children began to weep, and to cry out 'Mama!' 'These children are Jewish,' said the Rabbi. He had no doubt that among the last words they had heard from their mothers' lips, before the moment of separation, was the *Shema*.