

5 Ways to Pray with the *Shema*

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

The *Shema*, a Jewish creedal statement, would have been recited often, twice daily, by Jesus, a faithful 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). Here are five ideas for enlivening your prayer life with an awareness of the *Shema*.



1. *Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone* (Deut. 6:4). 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, soul and might* (cf. Deut. 6:5). Recite Deut. 6:4-9 as you prepare to undertake a challenging task which requires all your heart, soul and 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). 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 bed, in those last moments of consciousness before sleep comes, whisper the words of Deut. 6:4.



5. *And write them on the doorposts of your house* (Deut. 6:9). Frame an attractive copy of Deut. 6:4, place it near your front door and recite it as you leave home in the morning.

The *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

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.” (NA, 4)

At the Second Vatican Council the Church gave powerful recognition to its origins, that is, the faith of ancient Israel: its scriptures, its traditions, its fidelity to the covenant. It affirmed the fact that the Jewish and Christian peoples are profoundly linked by a shared spiritual and biblical heritage.

How natural and beautiful, then, for us as Catholics to turn to our Jewish brothers and sisters for insight and encouragement as we reflect together on the scriptures we have in common, especially that part of scripture which the Jews call (by its Hebrew name) ‘Torah’ and which we often call (by its Greek name) the ‘Pentateuch’: the first five books of the bible. These five books were precious to Jesus who, as a faithful Jew, studied and quoted them. They form an essential part of the biblical foundations upon which the New Testament rests.

At Vatican II, and in the years of dialogue with the Jewish people that have followed, the Church calls the faithful to a new appreciation of their Jewish ancestry-in-faith. This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, is one response to that call. It offers a means for Catholics to reflect on Torah, enriched by the stories and 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 (Deut.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. What is so significant about this verse? Read on.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *A Woman's Torah Commentary* (NY, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2003); *Jewish Encyclopedia*, accessed online at www.jewishencyclopedia.com; Jewish information site: www.aish.com. Scripture quotations: *NRSV* (unless otherwise indicated).

Tasting Torah

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

Listen, Israel: YHWH is our God. YHWH is one (Deut.6:4, Friedman).

Read both these translations a few times, aloud, slowly. (Note: YHWH, the unutterable name of God, is traditionally read as *Adonai*, 'the Lord', but not as 'Yahweh'.) 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, the words that remind us of the 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?

Due to the fluidity in the Hebrew language, the latter part of v.4 is usually 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.

One interesting rabbinic commentary notes that in the Hebrew text the word for 'heart' appears as in the plural form as opposed to the singular. Why? A tantalizing question for your *havrutah* discussion!

Depthing Torah

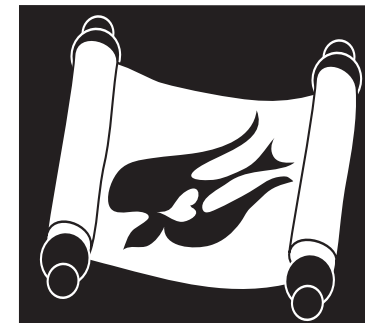
"Which commandment is the first of all?" asks a scribe in Mark's Gospel. Jesus answers by quoting the *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one..." (12:19). Where else do we find echoes of the *Shema* in the New Testament? Can we hear, for instance, soundings of the *Shema* in the voice 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 is that foundation laid? 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 for centuries 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

As Nazi policies took hold in Europe 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,' the Rabbi was able to say with utter certainty. He had no doubt that among the last words they had heard from their mothers' lips, before the moment of separation, was the *Shema*.