

To Listen
and
To Love

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METIVTA, A CENTER FOR CONTEMPLATIVE JUDAISM

To Listen and To Love

Table of Contents

Introduction	4
Sh'ma - Hebrew	5
Sh'ma - transliteration	6
Sh'ma - English	7
Hear	8
O Israel	10
YHVH is our God	12
YHVH is One	14
And You Shall Love	16
With a Whole Heart	18
With Every Breath	20
All You Have and Are	22
These Words	24
This Day	26
Upon Your Heart	28
Teach Them	30
Speak of Them	32
Walking On Your Path.....	34
Lying Down	36
Rising Up	38
A Sign Upon Your Hand.....	40
Any Eye Between Your Eyes	42
Upon Your Doorposts	44
And Upon Your Gates	46
Conclusion	48

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Introduction

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad

Central texts in every faith tradition capture the essence of what that faith has to say regarding belief and practice. In Judaism, that text is the *Sh'ma/Ve'ahavta* (Listen/Love). The Sh'ma is to be recited upon waking in the morning, upon falling asleep at night, during daily morning and evening prayers, and at the moment of our death. No other text plays such a vital role in the lives of the Jewish people.

The Sh'ma is so ubiquitous that the deeper meanings of the text are often overlooked. This little booklet seeks to redress that situation by setting forth the meaning of the text in simple, clear prose. My hope is that if you understand the meaning of this text, you will make it—and the spiritual practices it advocates—a central part of your daily life.

Here is the text of the Sh'ma in Hebrew and on the following pages is a transliteration and my free English translation:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל,
 יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד
 וְאֵהְיֶה אֵת יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, בְּכֹל-
 לְבָבֵנוּ, וּבְכֹל-נַפְשֵׁנוּ, וּבְכֹל-
 מַאֲדָנוּ. וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה,
 אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם, עַל-
 לְבָבֵךְ: וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבְנֵינוּ,
 וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ בְּבֵיתֶךָ,
 וּבְלַכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבֶךָ,
 וּבְקוּמָךָ. וְקִשְׁרָתָם לְאוֹת עַל-
 יָדֶיךָ, וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ,
 וְכִתְבָתָם עַל מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתֶךָ
 וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

*Sh'ma Yisrael
Adonay Eloheinu,
Adonay Echad.*

*Ve'ahavta
et Adonai Elohecha
b'chol l'vavcha,
uv'chol nafsh'cha,
uv'chol m'odecha.
V'hayu had'varim ha-eileh
asher anochi m'tzav'cha
hayom al l'vavecha.
V'shinantam l'vanecha.
V'dibarta bahm
b'shivt'cha b'veitecha
uv'lecht'cha vaderech.
Uv'shochb'cha uv'kumecha.
Uk'shartam l'ot
al yadecha, v'hayu l'totafot
bein einecha.
Uch'tavtam al m'zuzot
beitecha uvish'arecha.*

Hear, O Israel:
YHVH is our God,
YHVH is one.

You shall love YHVH with a whole heart;
with every breath;
with all you have and are.
And these words which I command you this day
are upon your heart.
Teach them to the children.
Speak of them when sitting in your house,
when walking on your path,
when lying down and when rising up.
Bind them as a sign upon your hand
that your deeds be just.
Set them as an eye between your eyes
that your vision be daring and true.
Inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house
and upon your gates,
that your going out and
your coming in be for peace.

(after Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

HEAR

Hearing is the first sense to develop in the womb and the last to fade at death. Hearing is our most fundamental sense and our most primal way of knowing. If we are to know God fundamentally, if we are to be aware of God as the primal ground of all being and becoming, it stands to reason that we will do so through the process of hearing.

If hearing is the gateway to knowing, we must be totally focused on what it is we are hearing. To listen that intently, we have to still the mind and body so as not to be distracted. When we listen completely, we hear and do not even know we are hearing; when we hear the oneness of God, we are no longer aware of the separateness of self.

And that is the point: Our hearing is to be so focused, so intense, so deep, that we no longer are aware of ourselves as separate persons doing the listening.

What do you do when you try to listen intently? First, you seek to shut out all ambient noise, both within you and around you. Then your body becomes very still, almost immobile. Every nerve ending is trying to work in concert with your ears to maximize your ability to hear. For a moment, all there is, is hearing. The very notion of a “you” that is listening is gone. There is just this full-bodied attention to hearing.

You have certainly experienced this at some point in your life. Listening closely to the divine compositions of Mozart, perhaps, you found that for a time you were not aware that you were listening; there was a hearing without a hearer. Or attending to the words of a great orator or poet, you suddenly discovered that time had passed and knowledge had been gained without your ever being aware of either. Or on a sadder note, when straining to hear a loved one sobbingly tell of a tragedy. Or even upon hearing a strange noise in your home or in a parking lot when you are all alone. The whole body/mind is united in hearing. With that unity, your sense of separate self simply vanishes.

This is the kind of hearing the Sh'ma requires.

O ISRAEL

The Hebrew word *Yisrael*, given to Jacob by the angel with whom he wrestled at the ford of Jabbok and taken by all of his descendants to refer to the Hebrew people, means *One Who Wrestles with God*.

You wrestle with God when you seek to make sense out of life, when you devote yourself to justice and compassion in a world that values greed and power. You wrestle with God when you wrestle with yourself in pursuit of godliness.

Judaism teaches that we are born innocent, not good or evil. We are neither saints nor sinners, but *bennoni*, people with a capacity for good and a capacity for evil. Our whole lives are a wrestling match between these competing desires, and there is no winner.

Jacob does not defeat his opponent nor is he defeated by him. Good does not triumph over evil nor evil over good.

Neither of our two competing desires, our *yetzer hatov* (capacity for good) and our *yetzer harah* (capacity for evil) defeats the other. Rather, the second becomes the servant of the first. Our desire for self is channeled into the service of our care for others, thus achieving Rabbi Hillel's suggestion that we need be for both: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But, if I am only for myself, what am I?* (Pirke Avot 1:14).

And when we achieve this marriage of self and other, we, like Jacob, receive the blessing of a new name; that is, we discover a new essence about ourselves. We are no longer just Shirley or Larry, Harold or Dina; we are *Yisrael*, beings capable of wrestling with Life without being defeated by living.

Israel is the peaceful spiritual warrior that is the quintessential servant of God.

YHVH IS OUR GOD

YHVH is the unpronounceable Hebrew Name of God.
It is unpronounceable to remind us that God cannot be reduced to speech or thought.

The Eternal God is not the
God of Abraham is not the
God of Isaac is not the
God of Jacob is not the
God of Sarah is not the
God of Rebecca is not the
God of Leah is not the
God of Rachel is not the
God of my childhood is not the
God of my youth is not the
God of my adulthood is not the
God of my old age is not the
God of my dying is not the
God of my imagining.
The Eternal God is not my creation.
The Eternal God is not the
God who chooses is not the
God who commands is not the
God who punishes is not the
God who creates is not the
God who destroys is not the

God who makes me win is not the
God who sees that my enemies lose.
The Eternal God is not my creation.
The Eternal God is the
God Who alone exists and Who exists alone.
When I am free from ancestors,
free from traditions, free from truths,
free from words, free from thoughts,
free from even the need to be free,
there is God and there I am not.
Blessed is the One at the heart of my emptiness.

• • •

The best understanding we have of YHVH comes from Moses' encounter at the Burning Bush, where God reveals the essence of divinity as *Ehyeh asher ehyeh*: I AM WHAT I AM and I SHALL BE WHAT I SHALL BE, suggesting that God is both the eternal and unchanging I AM and the temporal and changing I SHALL BE.

God is all that is. As a wave rising in and returning to the ocean, so everything arises in and returns to God. You are God. Just not all of God. The extent to which this is true for you is the extent to which you are open to a profound sense of inner peace and tranquility. The extent to which you are ignorant of this truth is the extent to which you are haunted by fear and plagued by unnecessary suffering.

YHVH IS ONE

Just as there is no separation between an ocean and its waves, so there is no separation between God and creation. It is all God; it is all One.

Schneur Zalman of Liady, the founder of Chabad Lubavitch hasidism, asked why we repeat the Sh'ma over and over again if all it is saying is that God is one and not seven. We grasp that distinction quite early, and repeating is a waste of breath.

Wasting breath is not something that any spiritual practice endorses, and the Rebbe reveals to us the true meaning of the Sh'ma: We repeat the Sh'ma not to remember that there is only one God, but to remind ourselves that in the face of all perceptions to the contrary, everything that is, is one in, with, and as God. Oneness is not a numerical fact but an ontological reality.

In the *Aleinu* prayer, Jews read: *Know this day in the depths of your heart that YHVH is God; in the heavens above and on the earth below there is nothing else* (ayn od). *Ayn od*, there is nothing else but God. The application of this fact to our daily lives is called Ethical Monotheism and it is the Jews' greatest gift to the world.

Ethical Monotheism understands that the fundamental unity of all life in God requires a universal moral code rooted in divine reality. One God necessitates one world, one humanity, and one moral code—justice and compassion for all.

These two words, YHVH ECHAD/God is One, are the heart of all Jewish teaching. All reality is of YHVH, the One Ineffable Unnameable Source and Substance of all being and becoming. No one faith owns God or can claim special privileges from God. No faith can exclude the righteous from any other faith without corrupting the very truths it pretends to own.

God is not Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or Hindu. No one has the exclusive road to God. No one has God's ear. God is One even as the paths to God are many.

AND YOU SHALL LOVE

This is a strange sentence. *You shall love!* Can love be commanded? No. No emotion can be “on tap,” and any forced feelings of love are deceptive and misleading. The text is not commanding us to love. Rather, it is pointing out that if you experience the absolute nonduality of God, then you will be filled with love for God and that manifestation of God we call Creation. *You shall love* is not a command, but an axiom: Do *A*, and *B* will surely follow.

Judaism speaks a lot about love: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself* (Leviticus 19:18); *You shall love the stranger* (Deuteronomy 10:9); *love is as strong as death* (Song of Songs 8:6); *love covers all errors* (Proverbs 10:12); *God loves you* (Deuteronomy 23:5). In the Sh'ma, we learn how to evoke love: by listening.

Linking listening and love should not be a surprise to you. You hear this from the people you love all the time. Your friends, your children, your spouse or partner, what do they want from you most? That you listen to them.

Listening says we care; listening says the other is important to us; listening says we will make the time and the effort to be present to another's pain and joy. Listening says, *I love you*.

Quite often during my meditation retreats, I invite people to engage in an exercise of simple listening. Working in pairs, one person asks the other, *Who are you?* and listens with full attention to the response. The question is repeated over and over for quite some time, and then the partners exchange roles and continue the questioning and the listening. One of the unexpected outcomes of this exercise is a feeling of love and compassion between the partners. It is the very act of listening that engenders love.

Listen and love. Listen and hear the absolute unity of all life in, with, and as God, and you will be filled with love and compassion for all beings. There are no strangers in God; there is no other in God. All there is, is God. *Ayn od*; there is no thing else.

WITH A WHOLE HEART

You cannot love half-heartedly. Without wholeness, there is no love. Yet wholeness is not the same as oneness or nonduality, and the difference between them is crucial.

God is One, and all things are one with God. That is the fundamental reality as seen from the perspective of God. As Rebbe Schneur Zalman taught, *When God looks at the world, God sees only God*. But what is true of the Absolute is not true of the Relative. What is true when looking at the world from God's eyes is not true when looking at the world from our eyes.

Judaism is not asking us to abandon our human perspective and negate ourselves in God as a moth is consumed by the flame. Judaism says there is a time for ecstatic unity and a time for passionate duality. In Judaism, it is not a matter of *either/or*, but always a matter of *and*.

So we are to love God with a whole heart, a wholly human heart, a heart that has achieved an inner wholeness and channeled the *yetzer harah* in the service of the *yetzer hatov*; a heart that is not at war with itself; but also a heart that can embrace another without negating itself.

It is not good for earthlings to be alone (Genesis 2:18). *Therefore you shall leave your father and mother and cling to your spouse and you shall become one flesh* (Genesis 2:24). Love needs a lover. *Ani l'dodi v'dodi li/* I am of my beloved and my beloved is of me. The One needs the Other.

We are asked to love God *as if* God were other. We are challenged to love self and other *as if* there really were self and other; for from the perspective of temporary human life, such distinctions are real, necessary, and meaningful.

How do we bring ourselves to wholeheartedness?

We understand and make peace with the dark side of our personalities. We do not excuse our capacity for evil or the evil we have done. We make amends where we can, and do our best to channel all our passions for the good.

We listen. We make ourselves present to another in joy and in sorrow.

We love. We contract our self to make room for another and do not imagine that It is always about us.

WITH EVERY BREATH

Love God with every breath. There are two meanings here, reflecting two ways of using the breath: for speech and for silence.

Breath is essential for speech. We cannot form words without filling consonants with the breath of vowels. Indeed, one of the exciting things about Hebrew texts is that they contain no vowels, no breath. The reader supplies the vowels and breathes life into the text. Reading sacred Hebrew text is never a matter of simple recitation. It is an intimate union of breath and book. The reader is as essential to the text as the text is to the reader.

How do we love God with our speech? By practicing *sh'mirat halashon*, right speech—using our words to heal rather than to harm. *Life and death are in the power of the tongue* (Proverbs 18:21). Loving God with every breath is speaking loving words with every breath.

Breath is also essential to silence, the deep selfless silence that allows us to hear the unity of God. Every meditative system uses the breath as a tool for inner stillness and deep spiritual awakening.

And YHVH formed the earthling from the dust of the earth, and blew into the earthling the Breath of Life, and it was then that the earthling became a living being (Genesis 2:7). God's out-breath is our in-breath. Every time we inhale, we breathe

in the Breath of Life; every time we exhale, we return that gift to God. The rhythm of this breathing leads us to the still mind that hears the soft voice of stillness.

Be still and know that I am God (Psalms 46:10). Stillness is critical to deep listening, and it is deep listening that awakens us to the absolute oneness of God. Breath is a royal road to stillness.

Sit comfortably; breathe naturally; close your eyes. When you have settled down a bit, slowly and silently recite the Sh'ma in sync with your breathing. Start on the in-breath and end on the out-breath: Breathe in *Sh'ma*, breathe out *Yisrael*, breathe in *Adonai*, breathe out *Eloheinu*.

Continue in this way so that the final word of the Sh'ma (*Echad*) is recited on the out-breath. Pay special attention to this final out-breath, extending it a bit as a means of melting into the One from Whom all breath comes and to Whom all breath returns. At the conclusion of each recitation sit silently; breathe; and allow a deep stillness to quiet both your body and your mind. If and when your mind wanders, return to your recitation. Do this for 30 minutes everyday. In time the silence between recitations will lengthen until, with the grace of God, you will finally melt into the ineffable presence of Adonai Echad: the nondual reality of God.

ALL YOU HAVE AND ARE

Here, Torah speaks of *me'odecha*, all that we have, all our possessions, all our possessing. Spiritual awakening is not separate from everyday living, and spiritual practice must engage everyday actions.

We love God with all we have and are by practicing *eco-kashrut*, seeing that our dealings with each other and with nature are in accord with the highest ethical and moral standards.

Eco-kashrut means buying only what we need and making sure our purchases are ethically and environmentally sound.

It means leaving something over for others by donating ten percent of our earnings to help the poor.

It means realizing that the earth is YHVH's, that we are her caretakers, and that we own nothing. Torah teaches us that we were created to tend the Garden (Genesis 2:15), not to turn it into a gated luxury community or high-rise office building.

There is much confusion over the story of creation in the Book of Genesis. For centuries, the Western world has taken the command to *fill the earth and subdue it* (Genesis 1:28) as license to exploit nature for our own narrow ends. If we drive species to extinction as we *fill the earth*, so be it; if we deplete her natural resources and weaken her sustainability as we *subdue the earth*, well, that is what God intended. But it is not what God intended.

Now all the trees of the field were not yet on the earth and all the herb of the field had not yet sprouted because YHVH God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no human to till the soil (Genesis 2:5). YHVH God took the human and placed him in the Garden of Eden to till and to preserve it (Genesis 2:15).

What was God's intention? To create a world where all creatures, human and otherwise, work together to bring out the richness inherent in the earth.

What is the purpose of humanity? To till and preserve. We are necessary to both the productivity of the earth and her preservation. We are as necessary to life as rain is. We are part of the process by which the unfolding of life happens.

We need to remind ourselves of this if we are to love God with all we have and are. Eco-kashrut is one practical way of do so.

THESE WORDS

What words? THESE WORDS: *listen* and *love*.

Religion is prone to complexity; spirituality is simple. Theology is given to arcane discourse; God is everyday reality. Religion establishes hierarchies of power; spirit is everywhere and available to all.

Torah is warning us: Do not get distracted by the sophistry of religion; focus instead on these words; attend to what is essential—listening and loving.

In an ancient *midrash* (folk tale), Moses peers into the future and listens to Rabbi Akiva expounding Torah. Moses is upset: this is not his Torah; but Akiva's claim that his words derive from Torah calms Moses down. This is a rabbinic story justifying rabbinic complexity, and we are meant to smile at Moses' naivete. I, for one, am not smiling.

The great stories of Torah are about individual encounters with God. Religion, however, focuses on matters of ritual and law. Such a focus necessitates a priestly elite who maintain their position and power by convincing us that we need what it is they alone have to offer. They first convince us we are ill and then sell us the cure.

What is the disease? That you are cut off from God. What is the cure? Adherence to this or that religion or cult. What is the truth? *Surely, God is present in this place, and I did not realize it!* (Genesis 28:16).

There is no separation from God; there is no original sin; there is no fall from grace. There is only forgetting and remembering the Truth.

We forget the truth when we get distracted from *this place*, the place we are at this very moment. We remember the truth when we return our attention to the here and now. In other words, when we listen and love.

Attend to THESE WORDS, listen and love, and do not get trapped in other words: faith and fear, sin and salvation, heaven and hell, the saved and the damned, the chosen and the not chosen. They will distract you, confuse you, and lead you away from the simple realization that God is all.

THIS DAY

This day. Today. Now.

God is the timeless now, and awakening lies in the immediacy of the moment.

We live a second-hand reality filtered through memory of past experience. If we are to awake to the spiritual reality of God, we must be present to the actuality of God in the here and now.

The ancient rabbis called God *HaMakom*, the Place. God is the place you are right this moment.

There is nowhere you have to go to find God. On the contrary, all our goings distract us from being present to the Place in our place.

Much of our spiritual talk is intrinsically misleading. We speak of the spiritual quest, the spiritual journey, the spiritual path. We make pilgrimages to one holy site or another. We imagine that God is always over there, just around the next corner, the next workshop, the next meditation retreat.

This talk gives us a sense of accomplishment, for while we may not have found God, we can at least measure the miles we have put into finding God. But the truth is so much simpler. God is here and now. It is not that God is elsewhere, but that our attention is elsewhere.

That is why the deepest Jewish spiritual practice is called *t'shuvah*, return. Today, the word is used to refer to secular Jews who have returned to a traditional Jewish life, but this is not the original meaning of the word. T'shuvah means to return to God and godliness.

T'shuvah is returning the mind from its wanderings. Returning to this present moment, we discover God and shape our lives with godliness.

How do we practice t'shuvah? One of the easiest ways is called *gerushin*, repetition of a sacred word or phrase. Whenever you are feeling agitated, anxious, angry and upset, or whenever you discover you are no longer present to the moment and what it asks of you, shift your attention to your breathing and slowly and silently recite the Sh'ma, breathing in *Sh'ma* breathing out *Yisrael*, etc. With practice the recitation will cause your body to relax, your breath to soften, your heart to open, and your mind to let go of the fixed thoughts that so easily entrap you. You will be present to the moment and the One Who manifests it, responding to whatever is happening with awareness and compassion.

UPON YOUR HEART

These words of God are laid upon your heart; they are already an intimate part of your very being. You lack nothing; you need do nothing other than reclaim and recover that which is intrinsically yours: the heartfelt knowing of God.

It is natural for people to imagine that Truth is hard to find and thereby excuse themselves from finding it. But Moses tells us that truth *is not hidden from you and is not distant. It is not in heaven that you should excuse yourselves by saying Who can ascend to heaven for us and take it for us so that we can listen and do what is right? It is not across the sea that you should excuse yourselves saying Who can cross the ocean for us and take it for us that we can listen and do what is right? Rather it is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart to perform it* (Deuteronomy 30:11).

You already know what is true. You were born knowing. It is just more convenient to pretend you have never known. For if you admit to knowing, you are obligated to doing, and the doing can be tough.

Living an authentic spiritual life obligates us to continuous t'shuvah. The mind wanders, and we return it to the present moment. The heart strays after base desires, and we return it to right action. T'shuvah is not once and forever. It is this moment and this moment and this moment again.

To be human is to have a wandering mind. To be human is to have the capacity to return the mind from its wanderings. We need not scold the mind for this; it is only acting according to its nature. We simply need not acquiesce to it.

Some scriptures say that spiritual practice removes us from error. Judaism teaches something else. Judaism teaches that spiritual practice is the recognition of error and the righting of wrongs. Spirituality is about forgiving ourselves and others and working to see that we do not repeat the errors of the past without imagining that we will not invent new ones in the future.

Judaism is not about being perfect. Judaism is about perfecting ourselves one deed at a time. We return and we err; we make amends and we return; we return and we err... .

Judaism is a process, a process of t'shuvah.

TEACH THEM TO THE CHILDREN

God is the Eternal Present, but this does not mean there is no reality to time. All we can experience is the present moment, but this does not mean that the past never was or that the future will not yet be. Judaism does not deny time, it sanctifies it.

The time frame of the Sh'ma is generational. It is not enough for you to awaken to God; you must teach the truth of this awakening to the next generation.

In the Buddhist tradition, this is equivalent to the Bodhisattva ideal. In early Buddhism (as in much of early and contemporary Christianity), each person sought out his own private salvation. But in time, a new ideal arose, the Bodhisattva, the monk who so loved the world that he forfeited his own salvation to facilitate the salvation of others. Only when all beings are enlightened will the Bodhisattva choose to enter nirvana.

Judaism upholds this bodhisattva ideal. There is no talk of a separate peace; the salvation of each depends upon the salvation of all. It is the duty of each of us to achieve and model godliness for ourselves and for others. Especially for the children.

Do not imagine that because you may be childless you are exempt from this obligation. All children are your children. Mentoring and modeling t'shuvah is a challenge each of us must address in our own situation.

How do we teach the next generation? Judaism is very practical. It asks nothing esoteric of us. We need master no special yoga nor be initiated into any hidden teaching. Truth is as close to us as our breathing, in our mouths and upon our hearts that we might speak and do what is right and good.

The remainder of the Ve'ahavta focuses on just what it is we must do, and in this way, it sets forth the essential practices of a spiritually focused contemplative Judaism. These are not to take the place of the *mitzvot* (commandments) of Jewish life, but are part of them. We tend to focus on rules and ritual, pretending that that is all there is to Judaism. In so doing, we reduce Judaism to behavioralism and miss the heart of her teaching.

SPEAK OF THEM WHEN SITTING IN YOUR HOUSE

Talk with those in your household about the oneness of God. We are used to seeing Public Service Announcements on television urging us to talk to our children about sex, drugs, drinking, and smoking. Torah is asking us to do no less regarding God and godliness.

In my own community, I urge people to teach their children to ask the question *What would a mensch do?* before engaging in any act that is morally gray or questionable.

A mensch is a person who recognizes her capacity for both good and evil and takes the time to see that it is the former that dictates her actions rather than the latter. Asking *What Would a Mensch Do?* is an easy way to engage children, and adults, in a serious examination of personal ethics and morality.

In addition to speaking, Torah also mentions sitting. You are to focus on God and godliness *when sitting in your house*. One way to do so is to set aside both a time and a place at home for contemplative sitting, meditation and prayer.

When we were children, we often had a secret place we went to contemplate the realities of our world. Why is it that when we become adults we have to abandon that very wise practice?

Claim a space for meditation and prayer. Mark it as sacred with special items (candles, flowers, Jewish ritual objects) that remind you of the sacred work that is to be done there. Purchase meditation cushions or a comfortable chair and keep them in that place. Then sit there for thirty minutes every day practicing t'shuvah with the recitation of the Sh'ma.

WALKING ON YOUR PATH

Torah is not referring to some abstract notion of the spiritual path, but to real roads and streets. Godtalk is not for meditation corners. Asking *What would a mensch do?* is not limited to kitchen-table or bedside conversation. Spirituality has to be carried into the streets. It has to make a difference in the world.

Right alongside the challenge of t'shuvah is the challenge of *tikkun*, making things whole. There are two kinds of *tikkun*: *tikkun haolam*, repairing the world with justice and compassion, and *tikkun hanefesh*, repairing the soul with meditation, prayer and contemplation.

Torah has already told us to repair our souls by sitting in our homes. She is now telling us to repair our world by taking God and godliness into the streets.

Judaism is not a missionary religion, but it is evangelical. That is to say, Judaism does not require that a person become a Jew in order to be saved. Our deeds rather than our beliefs determine the status of our souls.

But Judaism is evangelical about its ethics. There is right and there is wrong. It is right to be honest and wrong to lie. It is right to be fair and wrong to steal. It is right to save life and wrong to murder. It is right to honor parents and wrong to ignore them. It is right to defend the weak and wrong to exploit them. Morality has nothing to do with race, creed, color, gender, sexual orientation, or class; right is right and wrong is wrong.

This is not to say that applying the principles of ethical monotheism is easy. Jewish literature is rich with ethical nuance and legitimate moral dilemmas. But the complexity of application should not obscure the simplicity of the principles themselves. We may not always know how to do what is right, but it is rarely that difficult to know what is right.

LYING DOWN

There are moments just before we fall asleep at night when the separate self fades. There is a lightness about us that is too subtle for words. It is then that focusing on the unity of all things in, with, and as God is very powerful.

Judaism offers a set of rituals for bedtime. Shortly before going to sleep, we make a *cheshbon hanefesh*, a moral review of our day. Who did we help today, and who did we harm? To whom do we need to say *thank you* tomorrow, and to whom do we need to say *I'm sorry*? What amends do we need to make, and what changes in our behavior are needed to see that we are a little more holy tomorrow for having learned from the experiences of today?

If a problem needs solving, it is customary to write it out on a small slip of paper and place it under your pillow as you settle into bed. Ask God to direct your dreams to this problem and see if over the next few nights you do not dream something that will help you with the issue at hand.

It is also wise to send blessings of peace, healing, and compassion to those you love—and to those with whom you may be in conflict. Picture their faces in your mind and speak lovingly to them.

The Ve'ahavta is offering us yet another bedtime practice. When you are ready to fall asleep, close your eyes and silently or softly recite the Sh'ma to yourself. Then visualize the letters of God's most holy Name

יהוה/יהוה

lightly etched on your forehead. You may feel a slight warmth generating from the letters; if so, allow it to filter throughout your body, releasing the tension of day. Do not concentrate on the letters, just let them be. You do not want to conjure up associative thoughts around the letters. You just want to feel them.

In this way, you will make falling asleep an opportunity for *t'shuvah*, returning to your original nature by inviting the self to slip into God consciousness.

RISING UP

This is the last of the four postures mentioned in the Ve'ahavta: sitting, walking, lying down, and rising up. Various yogas call these four postures the essential postures of humankind. Everything we do is a variation of these four movements. The Ve'ahavta is Jewish yoga, linking each of these postures with t'shuvah and tikkun, returning to God and godliness.

At the moment of initial wakefulness, we are not yet preoccupied with self; there is a stillness and openness about us. If we can rest in that stillness for a few moments, we will find an opportunity for t'shuvah.

There is no method for remaining in this state, and as soon as you try to apply one, you have lost it. This is a moment for simply listening, the mind and body still and not yet stirred to distraction. You wait, and listen without strain. Every once in while, you will hear with your entire body/mind YHVH ECHAD, the oneness that is God.

When such a hearing comes to you, it is important that you honor it. The experience may last only a second, but when it passes, you must make a careful transition to full wakefulness so as not to lose the memory of that experience in the distractions of the discursive mind.

After resting in the stillness for a few moments, gently begin the silent recitation of the Sh'ma. Do this slowly, breathing in and out evenly and easily. As you recite the Sh'ma you may notice a subtle shift in your body and mind that marks a gearing up for the day. At this point conclude the Sh'ma, open your eyes and recite the "Modeh/Modah Ani" (say "modeh" if you are male, "modah" if you are female), giving thanks for the return of consciousness....

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לְפָנֶיךָ, מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִם,
שֶׁחֲזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי בְּחֶמְלָה רַבָּה
אֲמוּנָתְךָ.

*Modeh/modah ani l'fanecha, melech chai v'kayam,
shehechezarta be nishmati b'chemla—
rabbah emunatecha.*

With a thankful and grateful heart,
I honor the return of consciousness.
May I live the day's unfolding with compassion
and foster faith in the One Who is All.

A SIGN UPON YOUR HAND

The ancient rabbis saw in this phrase the commandment of *tefillin*, the black boxes containing the Sh'ma that are worn on the head and arm during morning prayers. Here is a simple way to use tefillin in your morning meditation practice.

Putting on Tefillin

Tefillin unite head, heart, and hand in the service of God. Wearing tefillin reminds you that you are part of the grand and infinite expanse of Life and as such have obligations toward all you meet, animate and inanimate, sentient and nonsentient. Before putting on the tefillin, recite the following:

I place these tefillin upon myself
for the sake of unification.

May I carry out my tasks with attention, seeing both
the One and the Many
as extensions of That Which Is Beyond Them Both.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ עַל מִצְוֹת
תְּפִלִּין.

*Baruch ata Adonai Eloheinu melech ha olam asher kidshanu
b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu al mitzvat t'fileen.*

The tefillin are wrapped in a special way: three bands above the elbow and seven on the forearm. As you wrap each strap, recall the attributes of holiness for which it stands and which you intend to embody:

Presence, Compassion, Tenderness,
Patience, Forbearance, Kindness,
Awareness, Love, Forgiveness, Freedom

Put the head tefillin above the bridge of your nose, centered between your eyes. This tefillin draws both upon the power of thought and intuition. Before tightening the head tefillin, recite the following:

Blessed are You who opens the eye to seeing.
May I see the world as You see it:
one, whole, and holy.

Wrap the remaining strand of the arm tefillin around your middle finger, twice below the knuckle and once above it. Then wrap the strand around your hand to form the three-pronged Hebrew letter *shin* on the back of your hand. The wrapping of the middle finger is a sign of betrothal between you and God. You pledge yourself to godliness, to being humanly holy, to making the world a little better today than it was yesterday. The letter shin stands for *Shaddai*, the Almighty, reminding you that you have the power to build up or to tear down and obligating you to act with justice and compassion. While making these final wraps of the tefillin, recite the following:

I am Your partner, forever wedded to
righteousness, justice, kindness, and mercy.
May my thoughts, feelings, actions, and words
reflect my fidelity to You,
the One Who manifests the many.

AN EYE BETWEEN YOUR EYES

While the ancient rabbis saw this sentence as a continuation of the commandment of tefillin, it is not accidental that the placing of the tefillin of the head coincides with what many other traditions call the Third Eye. Judaism does not use this term, but it does speak of a way of seeing that transcends what Albert Einstein called the optical delusion of dualistic seeing and thinking.

The Kabbalists speak of an *Etz Chayyim*, a Tree of Life, that is the subtle energy skeleton of the universe. This Tree consists of ten *sefirot*, energy centers, or *chakras*. For the energy of the universe to flow freely, these centers need to be in harmony, each one operating as a check and balance to its partner.

The mystics of the ChaBaD school of Hasidism teach that there is an eleventh *sefirah*, a hidden center of energy that emerges when the second and third sefirot are in balance. These sefirot are called *Chochma* and *Bina*, wisdom and understanding. *Chochma* is the intuitive wisdom of the right hemisphere of the brain. *Bina* is the reasoned understanding of the left hemisphere of the brain.

When *Chochma* and *Bina* are in harmony, when intuition and reason are functioning optimally and in sync each with the other, then the eleventh sefirah opens somewhere between and slightly above your eyes. This sefirah is called *Da'at*, Knowing. It refers to a deep and transformative mindfulness of the fundamental nonduality of all things in, with, and as God. We place the head piece of the tefillin on that spot where *Da'at* emerges as an invocation of this most subtle knowing.

The presence of the hidden sefirah reminds us to honor both *Chochma* and *Bina*, both intuition and reason. Judaism does not ask us to abandon reason in favor of intuition or sublimate intuition in favor of reason. Rather both are to be honed to their fullest potential in order to awake an even greater knowing that is *Da'at*.

UPON THE DOORPOSTS OF YOUR HOUSE

It is from this command that the rabbis derived the mitzvah of *mezuzah*. The word *mezuzah* literally means *doorpost*, but in time, it has come to refer to the decorative cases containing the Sh'ma that Jews place on the doorposts of their homes.

Mezuzot are to be placed upon every doorpost of every room in which you live. In this way, you are setting up reminders throughout your home calling you to t'shuvah, to return to God by returning your attention to the here and now.

For people for whom life is too busy to include a formal meditation or prayer practice, *mezuzah* can be the spiritual practice of choice. Indeed, given our hectic schedules and often short attention spans, *mezuzah* practice may well be the perfect alternative to lengthy periods of silent sitting and contemplation.

I learned *mezuzah* practice from my teacher Sylvia Boorstein, and while I will offer a slight modification of her teaching, it is to her that I am indebted for this wonderful insight.

First, purchase and affix *mezuzot* to the doorposts of your home. Place the *mezuzah* about one third of the way down the right-hand doorpost when facing the door as if to enter the room. Some people angle the *mezuzah* about 45 degrees so that the top of the casing is slanted toward the room. Others prefer to keep the *mezuzah* upright. As you attach each *mezuzah*, recite the following:

Blessed is the Source of Life
Who offers me a way of t'shuvah
through the use of this *mezuzah*.

Before you enter any room bearing a *mezuzah*, take a moment to slow down and center yourself. Sylvia teaches that we should make peace in our hearts with everyone with whom we may be in conflict before we enter the room.

I offer a less intense practice for those who, like me, find Sylvia's a bit too demanding: As you enter the room, take a moment and offer blessings to those with whom you may be in conflict. *May you be happy, may you be peaceful, may you be free* is what I say most often.

Why focus on conflict? Our goal is to free ourselves from the distractions that keep us from knowing God is in this place. Conflict is a great distracter. Blessings of peace to those with whom we struggle can be freeing to both them and us.

AND UPON YOUR GATES

When I come home at the end of a tiring day, the mezuzah by my front door says to me, *Don't let the tumult of the day disturb the peace of your home*. When I leave home in the morning, the mezuzah says to me, *Take a bit of this peace with you into the world*. Both messages are wise and welcome, but both remain within the context of my household.

When we set mezuzot on our gates, we are doing something different. Here the mezuzah reminds us that the world is also our home and all earth's creatures are our household. Placing mezuzot upon our gates challenges us to move beyond the duality of *us versus them*. However you choose to heed this command, its purpose is to mark every going in and every coming out with love.

Leonard Sweet, a wonderful Christian minister who I count among my treasured teachers, speaks of *mezuzah-ing* certain moments of our lives. He means we should remember moments when God's grace was clearly present to us and then recall those moments to keep us focused on the work of godliness.

Not having grown up with real mezuzot, Leonard turns the mezuzah into a metaphor for moments of personal sanctity and salvation. I would not want us to lose the physicality of our mezuzot practice, for the very physical presence of the mezuzah has a power to it. Yet I think Leonard is on to something.

Placing mezuzot on our gates is a metaphor for sanctifying all our encounters with other beings. Gates are the place of meeting between self and other. They signify where the boundary of self is open to the presence of the other. It is right there at that place of profound meeting that we need to place our mezuzah. Mezuzot on our gates means that we recognize the other as a manifestation of God just as we ourselves are manifestations of God.

CONCLUSION

I have said the Sh'ma thousands of times in my life, yet every time I say it, the meaning of the words continues to challenge me.

Hear. Listen. Become so still that the chatter of my own mind no longer blocks out the Voice of God whispering in my own heart. Feel the vibrations of the Ineffable Source and Substance of all Being and Becoming dancing through me. And then love.

Love myself. Love others. Love those who love me and love those who do not. Love that which can love back and that which cannot. Just love. Not romantic love, but the simple expression of care, compassion, and concern that flows directly from hearing the oneness of God.

Love God. God above all. God within all. God as all. Let every heart beat, every breath, every possession sing of the wonder of life and the One Who manifests it.

And let this love be on my lips always. When I sit, when I walk, when I lie down to sleep, and when I rise up to a new day.

Let it be on my lips when I speak to children that they might see in me a guide.

Let it be on my lips when I speak to strangers that they might see in me a friend.

Let it be on my lips as I come home and as I go out so that I never forget the simple reality of God's presence.

Listen and love. T'shuvah and tikkun. Return and repair. This is what Judaism is. The mitzvot and folkways, the rules and rituals, the 3,000-year-old teachings and newly minted commentaries—these are all expressions of the heart teaching of Torah: listen and love.

There is nothing more we have to do. Nothing less we can do if we are to actualize our true nature as God's Breath.

So let me close this little book the way it began:

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל, יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְיָ אֶחָד:

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad.

Rami Shapiro is widely regarded as one of the most creative voices in contemporary American Judaism. An award-winning poet and essayist, he has created liturgies that are used in prayer services throughout North America. He has written more than a dozen works of poetry, liturgy, short story, and nonfiction.



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His most recent books are *Minyan*, *10 Principles for Living Life with Integrity*, *Wisdom of the Jewish Sages*, *The Way of Solomon*, and *The Book of Proverbs*.

About METIVTA

Metivta (Aramaic for spiritual fellowship and academy) is a transdenominational resource for Jewish study, contemplation, and spiritual practice founded in 1991 by Rabbi Jonathan Omer-Man. Rooted in the lineage and teachings of the Jewish mystical traditions of kabbalah and hasidism, we provide authentic Jewish spiritual teachings and practices in a manner that is accessible, inclusive, and practical.

We offer a variety of courses in Torah and text study, Jewish contemplative practices, mutli-year training programs for rabbis, cantors, Jewish educators, and lay people in hasidic and kabbalistic texts and practices, and a three year certification program in Jewish spiritual guidance for people wishing to become Morei Derekh, Jewish spiritual counselors.

In addition to our classes and workshops, we hold holy day and other retreats both in the greater Los Angeles area and throughout the fifty United States and Canada. These retreats feature a wide range of outstanding Jewish scholars and meditation teachers, and help you deepen both your meditation practice and your knowledge of Jewish contemplative texts and teachings.

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