



Understand Our Prayers – The Shema

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Shema Yisrael – “Hear O Israel Adonai is our God, Adonai is One” – is perhaps the most famous of all Jewish prayers. The Shema is a declaration of faith, a pledge of allegiance to One God. It is said upon arising in the morning and upon going to sleep at night. It is said when praising God and when beseeching Him. The Talmud says that when Jacob was about to reveal the end of days to his children, he was concerned that one of them might be a non-believer. His sons reassured him immediately and cried out, “Shema Yisrael.” The Torah records Moses including the Shema in his farewell address to the Jewish people. We recite Shema when preparing to read the Torah on Sabbaths and festivals. And we recite Shema at the end of the holiest day of Yom Kippur when we reach the level of angels.

As Messianic believers it behooves us to understand the role of this verse, from Deut 6:4, in the theological thought of Paul of Tarsus. Many in the Protestant Evangelical world read Romans as Paul’s teaching that the Torah is no longer valid for those who believe. This is so far from the truth and is not a bit credible.

By his use of the Shema, Paul asserts the oneness of God to both Jew and Gentile. When one who is gentile comes to faith in Yeshua Messiah there is to be no wholesale rejection of the Torah as an obsolete document. (Indeed the agreement in Acts 15 between Paul and the Pillars giving gentiles minimum requirements raises the status of those gentiles who come to faith to that of *ger tzedek* or ‘righteous convert’.) Paul further reaffirms the validity of the law to believing Jews in Romans 3.21, 7.12-14, 9.2-5, 11.28-29, 15.8.

If the oneness of God is inherent in Deut 6.4, for the God of Israel is the very same God of all (as noted in Romans 1.16-2.29), a Gentile coming to Yeshua could not live according to Jewish law for that would be a denial of God’s oneness. This in no way is a devaluation of the Torah.

So then the question, as is posed by those who denigrate observing Torah, is what advantage is there for the Jew to live by Torah? These questioners would expect Paul to say that there is none but in Romans 3.2, Paul says there is great advantage for the Jews have been entrusted with the very word of Torah. So, in using the Shema as the basis of his missionary theology, Paul poses this conundrum to Jew and Gentile alike. How can you, the Jew, deny the validity of the gentile coming to faith through Yeshua and being grafted into *True Israel*? For when you deny the Gentile into faith without the law you are veritably denying the oneness of Adonai.

Torah is indeed witness to Paul’s own approach in Romans 1.16 “to the Jew first and then to the Gentile”. As to the Gentiles, Paul states that you need not accept the complete gamut of Torah to come to faith. This is not be Torah is not valid. Far from it! But if Gentile becomes Jew to accept God there is equal denial of the universalism of God as found in the Shema.

And that is why Paul goes to Abraham for proof of his theological stance. Abraham’s actions in accepting God does not show observance of Torah for it had not yet been given. But the faith of the Patriarch and the promise to Abraham is grounded in God’s need to separate those who observe the Torah from the rest of the world until He was ready to allow His promises to Abraham, “*and the nations of the earth will be blessed by you*” to come to fruition.

Hence, Jew and Gentile come together each in his own way, grated together as True Israel, to proclaim the oneness of God; the Jew through Torah and Gentile through faith in Yeshua and the self-acceptance of our mutual Hebraic roots as Seed of Abraham.



The Shema

as a document uniting Jew and Gentile in Messiah Yeshua

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As we are aware, the Shema is the affirmation of the unity of God and its twice daily recital as the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven.

There are two streams of understanding the Shema:

- The first points out that all the citations of Deut 6.5 that are found in the Brit HaChadashah (Matt 22.37; Mk 12.30; Lk 10.27) differ from each other and do not conform to either the Masoretic text or that of the Septuagint. They adduce from this that it was 'off with old and on with the new'; i.e., the Lord's Prayer had supplanted the Shema in the early church and the words of the Shema were no long a mellifluous entity in the worship service of the early church. Thus, the Shema had very little to do with the theology of the fledgling church. In this case, there is no need to adhere to the Hebraic roots of our faith.
- The other stream correctly believes that the Shema is a 'template for theological reflection and construction of Jesus traditions for the early Christianity'. This is proven by the many allusions to the Shema in the literature of the Brit HaChadashah (i.e., Matt 4.1-11, where the 'Temptation' story is based on the rabbinic interpretation of Deut 6.5 as found in *Mishna Berachot* 9.5 – where the 1st temptation is related to loving God with all you heart, the 2nd with all soul, the 3rd all you might).

It is only in Mark 12.28-34 that the Shema is cited in full. It contains the injunction 'to hear' the affirmation of God's oneness and, also, the command to love God. The question asked there by the scribe that Yeshua answers with the Shema was occasioned by a possibility of three reasons:

1. whether a multitude of laws and *mitzvoth* (commandments) can be summed up in a succinct manner
2. that the summing up will teach the essence of Judaism and give a hermeneutic for interpreting the Torah and thus understanding which *mitzvah* (commandment) has priority over another
3. if the essence of faith is defined, it will reveal what truly constitutes membership in the Judaic faith.

There was no normative Judaism in 1st century Israel so that this was an appropriate question to be asked. Indeed, Hillel, a contemporary rabbi of Yeshua was asked the same question by a gentile in b. Shabbat 31a.

Yeshua's answer indicates that the Shema is the essence of Torah – both written and oral – providing a hermeneutic for the proper understanding of Torah. What is interesting is that He

continues on to speak of the second commandment – something not asked by the scribe. By doing this He shows that the love of God is inextricably linked with loving one's neighbor. This was already understood in Judaism as we can see from T. Iss.5.2; T. Dan. 5.3; Philo, Virt 95 and Spec 2.63.

Theologically speaking, the scribe points out in vv 32-33 that since the Shema sums up Torah, it relativises [*treat as relative*] the Temple cultus [*external religious practice and observance*]. The covenantal identity is actually the praxis [*practice*] of loving God and neighbor and cannot be supplied by the Temple cultus. This realization has been anticipated in Jer 6.20; 7.1-7; Hos 6.6; Amos 4.4; Micah 6.6-8.

What Yeshua is harking back to – **and this is theologically important to Messianic belief** – is to the period of Israelite faith history prior to its corruption by the priesthood and Temple. In other words, loyalty to the Torah is not the same as loyalty to the cultus! We now turn to Paul and see how he regards the Shema as axiomatic for his understanding of the identity of the new people of God that centers on Messiah Yeshua. In turning to Gal 3.19-20 we see that the statement 'God is One' must refer to the Shema. Paul appeals to the Shema for two reasons:

1. there can be no greater appeal to the oneness of God, and
2. the Shema underwrites the existence of the new community.

The argument goes this way: If this one God made a promise to Abraham which is realized only thru faith, then this one God will adopt the same modus operandi for this new community established by Messiah Yeshua.

Roman 3.27-31 now comes into play. Here Paul proscribes Jewish boasting through Torah by hinting to the Shema in arguing that since God is one, justification of the circumcised and uncircumcised must come only through one means – faith. So the proper understanding of the Shema forbids Gentiles from becoming Jews because to do otherwise will not only deny the oneness of God but also His election of Israel. Faith, and not a communal badge as a Jew, is the only way for Gentiles to be included in the oneness of God. Paul, obviously, was inspired in the argumentation by Zechariah 14.16-19 that universalizes the theology of the Shema.

There is no doubt that Paul in speaking to a mostly Gentile church in Corinth is referring to the Shema in 1st Corinthians 8.6.

1. Paul uses Jewish belief in one God as the frame in his discussing whether it is OK to eat food offered to idols.
2. Paul bifurcates [*divide into two parts*] the Shema with the result that *Theos* is used for the Father and *Kurios* for Messiah Yeshua.
3. This bifurcation implies that Paul is still keeping to Jewish belief in one God but redefines the belief to include Messiah Yeshua.
4. This is the key redefinition of the Shema that allows us to unite, Jew and Gentile, into one Messianic community

In redefining the Shema, Paul brings Yeshua into the creative activity of the one God. Doing so calls for our continued understanding of our Hebraic roots. For the Jews, as specified in Torah, and for the Gentile as inwardly felt in the observance of Kashrut, Shabbat and Festivals.

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See Rabbi Herb's biography for his salvation experience.

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