

**The Blessings of the Priests before the Sh'ma**  
The priests in the Temple would say the following *b'rakhat* before the Sh'ma: "May the one who dwells in this House always grant you love, harmony, peace, and friendship."  
—TALMUD OF THE LAND OF ISRAEL

**You Have Loved Us Deeply**

With a great love (*ahavah rabah*) You have loved us (*ahavtanu*). The love of God for the people Israel is declared here just before the Sh'ma. It prepares us for the Sh'ma. Now you might expect a listing of gifts to us—God's freeing us, feeding us, delivering us. Instead, we thank God for one gift: God's teaching, God's opening our minds and hearts to Torah.

What You've given us is the ability to listen to You, so we can thank and draw close to You. Your compassion is expressed in teaching our hearts to know compassion, to love You, giving us personal freedoms but, in fact, boundaries bringing us close to the Unbounded, the One. By giving us Torah, You've shown us how to live. We can now offer thanks and say:

"Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is one."

—JOHN J. CLAYTON

**Second B'rakah before the Sh'ma: God's Great Love**

You have loved us deeply, ADONAI our God, and showered us with boundless compassion. *Avinu Malkeinu*, for the sake of our ancestors who trusted in You and to whom You taught the laws of life, so may You be gracious to us and instruct us. Kind creator, have compassion for us, open our hearts so that we may understand and, with love, discern, hear and study, observe, perform, and fulfill all the teachings of Your Torah with love. Enlighten our eyes with Your Torah; attach our hearts to Your mitzvot; unify our hearts to love and revere Your name so that we never lose hope. As we trust in Your great, holy, awe-inspiring name, we will delight and rejoice in Your deliverance.

*Some gather their tzitzit before reciting this line:*

► Bring us safely from the four corners of the earth, and lead us in dignity to our land, for You are the God who effects deliverance. You have chosen us from all other tongues and peoples, always drawing us nearer to Your name, that we may truly acknowledge You and lovingly proclaim Your oneness. *Barukh atah, ADONAI, who lovingly cares for the people Israel.*

Ahavah rabah ahavtanu Adonai eloheinu, hemilah g'dolah viteirah hamalta aleinu. Avinu malkeinu, ba-avur avoteinu [v'imoteinu] she-bathu v'kha va-t'lamdeim hukey hayim, ken t'honeinu u-c'lamdeinu. Avinu ha-av ha-rahaman, ha-m'raheim, raheim aleinu, v'ten b'libeinu l'havin u-l'haskil lishmo-a l'ilmod u-l'lamed lishmor v'la-asot u-l'kayem et kol divrei talmud toratekha b'ahavah.

V'ha-eir eineinu b'toratekha, v'dabeik libeinu b'mitzvotekha v'yahed l'vaveinu l'ahavah u-l'yirah et sh'mekha, v'lo neivosh l'olam va-ed. Ki v'shem kodsh k'ha ha-gadol v'hanora batahnu, nagilah v'nism'hah bishuatekha.

*Some gather their tzitzit before reciting this line:*

► Va-havi-einu l'shalom mei-arba kanfot ha-aretz, v'tollikheinu kom'miyut l'artzeinu, ki el po-el y'shu-ot atah, u-vanu vaharta mikol am v'lashon, v'keiravtanu l'shimkha ha-gadol selah be-emet, l'hodot l'kha u-l'yahedkha b'ahavah. Barukh atah adonai, ha-boher b'amo yisrael b'ahavah.

**אהבה רבה אהבתנו, יהוה אלהינו, המלה גדולה ויתרה המלת עלינו. אבינו מלכנו, בעבור אבותינו [ואמותינו] שבטחו בך ותלמדם חקי חיים, בן תוקננו ותלמדנו. אבינו, האב הרחמן, המרחם, רחם עלינו ותן בלבנו להבין ולהשפיל, לשמע, ללמד וללמה, לשמר ולעשות ולקיים את כל דברי תלמוד תורתך באהבה.**

**והאר עינינו בתורתך, ודבק לבנו במצותיך, ויחד לבנו לאהבה וליראה את שמך, ולא נבוש לעולם ועד. כי בשם קדשך הגדול והנורא בטחנו, נגילה ונשמחה בישועתך.**

*Some gather their tzitzit before reciting this line:*

► והביאנו לשלום מארבע פנות הארץ, ותוליכנו קוממיות לארצנו, כי אל פועל ישועות אתה, וכן בחרת מכל עם ולשון, וקרבתנו לשמך הגדול סלה באמת, להודות לך ולתודה באהבה.

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**ברוך אתה יהוה, הבורח בעמנו ישראֵל באהבה.**

**YOU HAVE LOVED US DEEPLY**  
אהבה רבה. The Hebrew root *ahf-hei-vet*, meaning "love," appears six times in this passage (both as the noun and a verb). Reuven Hammer points out that three of them speak of our love for God and three speak of God's love for us. While reciting this *b'rakhat*, the worshipper can anticipate the seventh occurrence, which is found in the first paragraph of the Sh'ma: "You shall love Adonai your God."

**AVINU MALKEINU** אבינו מלכנו. Literally, "our father, our king." The pairing of the two words emphasizes that God is at once both intimate as a close relation and distant as a monarch. The word *av*, "father," suggests the image of God as source or progenitor, and therefore it may also be translated as "creator."

**LAWS OF LIFE** חקי חיים. The word "Torah" encompasses many different meanings. In its most limited usage, it refers to the Five Books of Moses. But in a larger sense it refers to all of Scripture, and even to all of later Jewish teaching. Thus, the rabbis of the Talmud spoke of the "Written Torah" and the "Oral Torah," the latter referring to the teachings of the Midrash, Mishnah, and Talmud—and even to "whatever new teaching a student of wisdom might impart until the end of time" (Leviticus Rabbah 22:1). In this prayer, "Torah" embraces the widest meaning: the laws of life—all those teachings that instruct us concerning a full ethical and religious life.

**TO UNDERSTAND AND DISCERN . . . OBSERVE, FULFILL, AND PERFORM** ונשמך ולקיים ולעשות. . . . This sequence implies that study is intimately linked with action—indeed, that study should lead to action.

**GATHERING THE TZITZIT.** Many observe the custom, originating in the late Middle Ages, of gathering the four corners of the *tzitziyot* (plural of *tzitzit*) of the *tallit* while reciting the words "bring us safely from the four corners of the earth," thus symbolizing Israel's unity and ingathering. The *tzitziyot* are then held through the third paragraph of the Sh'ma, and kissed when reciting the word *tzitzit* (which appears three times in that paragraph). By this practice, we indicate that we are lovingly undertaking to observe these words of Torah, and we hope that our commitment to strive for holiness will lead to greater unity. We are also gathering within us all our positive intentions.