

## Hear, O Israel

The core of our worship is not a prayer at all, but a cry to our fellow Jews and fellow humans. In it we declare that God is one—which is also to say that humanity is one, that life is one, that joys and sufferings are all one—for God is the force that binds them all together. There is nothing obvious about this truth, for life as we experience it seems infinitely fragmented. Human beings seem isolated from one another, divided by all the fears and hatreds that make up human history. Even within a single life, one moment feels cut off from the next, memories of joy and fullness offering us little consolation when we are depressed or lonely. To assert that all is one in God is our supreme act of faith. No wonder that the Sh'ma, the first "prayer" we learn in childhood, is also the last thing we are to say before we die.

—ARTHUR GREEN

## The Challenge of Faith

The Israeli poet Yoram Nisnonovitch remarks that religious questions may not constitute the subversion of our faith; rather, it may help us get past tired notions that narrow our vision, and it may open our souls to new and deeper understandings. And his colleague Elhanan Nir adds: Doubts lead to a strong, surprising, and deep faith that cannot be compared with classical faith. This is a faith for which nothing is taken for granted.

## Recitation of the Sh'ma

Some people may wish to pause here for a moment. Some may close their eyes; others may place a hand over their eyes. The intention is to concentrate on God's oneness.

The following words are added in the absence of a minyan: God is a faithful sovereign.

**Hear, O Israel, ADONAI is our God, ADONAI is one.**

Sh'ma yisrael, Adonai eloheinu Adonai ehad.

*Recited quietly:* Praised be the name of the one whose glorious sovereignty is forever and ever.

You shall love ADONAI your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all that is yours.

These words that I command you this day shall be taken to heart.

Teach them again and again to your children; speak of them when you sit in your home, when you walk on your way, when you lie down, and when you rise up.

Bind them as a sign upon your hand

and as a symbol above your eyes;

inscribe them upon the doorposts of your home and on your gates.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

V'ahavta et Adonai elohekhā b'khol l'vav'kha u-v'khol nafsh'kha u-v'khol me'odekha. V'hayu ha-d'varim ha-eileh asher anokhi m'tzav'kha ha-yom al l'vavekha. V'shimantam l'vanekha v'dibarta bam, b'shivt'kha b'veitekha u-v'lekht'kha va-derekh u-v'shokhb'kha u-v'kumekha. U-k'shartam l'ot al yadekha v'hayu l'totafot bein einekha. U-kh'tavtam al m'zuzot beitekha u-visharekha.

## קְרִיאַת שְׁמַע

Some people may wish to pause here for a moment. Some may close their eyes; others may place a hand over their eyes. The intention is to concentrate on God's oneness.

In the absence of a minyan, we add the following:

**שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד.**

*Recited quietly:* שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד.

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

וְאָהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ: וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל-לִבְּךָ: וְלִשְׁנֹתָם לְבָנֶיךָ וּדְבַרְתָּ בָּם בְּשַׁבְּתֶךָ וּבְיַחְדְּךָ וּבְיָצִיְתְךָ וּבְדֵרֶכְךָ וּבְשׁוּמְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ: וְכָשָׁרְתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֶיךָ וְהָיוּ לְטוֹפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ: וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: דְּבָרִים וְאֶחָד:

covering his eyes came to be seen as a sign of deep contemplation, and so it became the custom of many to cover the eyes while reciting the Sh'ma, as a moment to meditate on God's unity.

**GOD IS A FAITHFUL SOVEREIGN** נֶאֱמַר מִלְּפָנֵי אֱמֶת. When we recite the Sh'ma with a minyan, the leader concludes with the words *Adonai eloheikhem emet*, "Your God truly"; when, in the absence of a minyan, that affirmation is not recited, we add this private affirmation at the beginning of the Sh'ma. The Kabbalists noted that the Sh'ma contained 245 words and so, by adding three additional words, we reach 248—the number of limbs in the body, according to the belief of the ancient rabbis. Thus we affirm, whether by adding words at the beginning or the end of the Sh'ma, that our entire being is dedicated to God.

**SH'MA YISRAEL** יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד. To whom are these words addressed? Certainly, we are speaking to ourselves, enjoining ourselves to truly hear what our lips are saying. We may also be speaking to each other—the collective people Israel—reminding each other that we are a people united by values, nurturing our own sense of peoplehood. A moving midrash imagines these words recited by Jacob's sons, addressed to their father Jacob/Israel, reassuring him on his deathbed that they remain true to his teachings, and that the God of Jacob is and will remain "their God" (Genesis Rabbah 98:3). And so, we too may be speaking to our forebears, reassuring our ancestors (all the way back to Jacob!) that their legacy continues in us.

**אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֶחָד**. The Hebrew word *ehad*, "one," has been variously interpreted. It can mean that God is totally unified and not made up of parts, as is the case with everything else we encounter in the universe. It can mean unique, that God is different from all else we encounter. It can mean "only," that there is no other being who is divine. Mystics interpret it as meaning that God is one with the universe—or in another formulation, present throughout the universe.

**פְּרָסוּ בְּשֵׁם יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְיָ אֶחָד**. This phrase is not part of the biblical text but was the customary response of those assembled to hearing the name of God as part of priestly prayers in the Temple. To differentiate it from the actual biblical text, it is recited silently. In the legend mentioned above, this sentence constituted Jacob's response to his children's affirmation, and so it is voiced differently.

**תְּסַבְּרֵם עַל קְרוֹזֹת הַדְּלָחוֹת**. The observant Jew lives a life surrounded by the Sh'ma: reciting it in the morning upon arising and at night before going to sleep, walking past its inscription on the *mezuzah* when entering one's home, and even adorning oneself with the words on weekday mornings upon one's head and near one's heart when putting on *t'fillin*, phylacteries.

**THE RECITATION OF THE SH'MA**. Rabbinic literature refers to the Sh'ma as a *k'riah*, a reading aloud of a passage of the Torah. Later it became a meditation as well, a way to focus on God's "oneness"—so much so that for some it became a moment to experience a mystical union with God.

The Babylonian Talmud reports: Rabbi Judah the Prince was teaching and needed to stop, since the hour for reciting the Sh'ma was passing, so he covered his eyes for a moment and then continued teaching (Berakhot 13b). In this story, reciting the Sh'ma was but a momentary interruption.

Later, Rabbi Judah's act of covering his eyes came to be seen as a sign of deep contemplation, and so it became the custom of many to cover the eyes while reciting the Sh'ma, as a moment to meditate on God's unity.