

LONG LIFE

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

"If someone extends the recitation of the word echad' (one) while saying Shema, Hashem will extend his days and years" (Brachos 13b). Our Sages reveal that aside from protecting each individual limb, the recitation of Shema also extends one's life. Why is the word "echad" so important? The most crucial part of the mitzva of Shema is the first line. Whilst saying it, a person must keep in mind that Hashem is the only power in the world, and that He is "echad," One and Unified in His existence. Without this in mind, a person does not fulfill the mitzva of Krias Shema and must repeat it (Shulchan Aruch 60,5).

When the letter ches, the second letter of echad, is inscribed in a Torah scroll it has two humps which form its "roof." This distinctive formation, which alludes to the heavens, symbolizes Hashem's absolute sovereignty over all of the Creation (Elia Rabba). In order to instill this within our hearts, the halachic authorities rule that the letter ches of the word "echad" should be extended slightly to give us enough time to contemplate Hashem's kingship.

The numerical value of the letter daled, the last letter of echad, is four. This symbolizes Hashem's rule, which extends to the four corners of the world. The halacha says that a person should extend the letter daled slightly to give himself enough time to contemplate Hashem's dominion throughout the world and beyond. However, practically this is difficult for Ashkenazim to do, and one should be careful not to mispronounce the word by doing so (Shulchan Aruch 61: 5,6).

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