

# SHEMA: THE HOLY ONE AND ONLY ONE

*by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene*

## *The Mitzvah:*

There is a Biblical injunction to recite the passages of Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, ibid 11:13-21 & Numbers 15:37-41) twice daily, every day (after awakening) and night (before retiring). The opening statement "Hear O Yisrael Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is [the Only] One" is among the first verses an infant recites and typically, it is the Jew's parting words as the soul departs this world.

Gathering his twelve sons around his deathbed, Yaakov wanted to disclose what would occur at the End of the Days (Genesis 49:1-2). However his efforts were frustrated as the Divine Presence left him, preventing Yaakov from making this revelation. Suspecting that this was because one of his sons was unrighteous, the Tribes pacified him by stating the verse of "Shema Yisrael". They said "Hear our father Yisrael. Just as your heart is one [with G-d], so too, our hearts are one [with G-d]. We are united in the service of G-d". Appeased, Yaakov recited "Blessed in the Name of his glorious kingdom for all eternity" (Pesachim 56a).

What was the undercurrent to this episode? And what has the End of Days got to do with the Twelve Tribes of Israel and the recitation of Shema?

Shema is integral to Jewish belief because this is the basis for Kabbalas oyl Malchus Shomayaim, Acceptance of G-d's Absolute Sovereignty that forms the foundation for all divine service by the Children of Israel.

The universe was fashioned solely for kavod Hashem, the glorification of G-d (Avos 6:11). The regular recitation of the Shema both day and night, explains the Sefer HaChinuch, combats man's susceptibility to sin. It acts as a perpetual reminder for the Jew to constantly signpost G-d in all his endeavors. The Children of Israel is dedicated to spreading the Name of G-d in the world - even at pain of death such as Rabbi Akiva's heroic Shema just before the Romans murdered him (See Talmud, Brochos 61b).

Belief in G-d means belief is a G-d who is Unique; a G-d Who is Absolutely One. Despite the plurality of our universe, the Shema stresses that all the forces in nature (denoted by the name Eloykim or Eloykeinu) emanate from a single, Source (Hashem) - "Hashem Eloykeinu Hashem echad". He is the Indivisible One. And accordingly, the Jewish people seek to become one with Him.

Sadly, there are plenty of people that lead lives without any reference to the Creator and Master of

the Universe. This world typically masks the omnipresence of G-d. The Jewish nation's efforts at proclaiming G-d and His Glory are stifled as they are dispersed, persecuted and despised. Only at the End of Days, will the former glory of the Jewish people be restored. Only then, will the Glory of G-d finally be revealed to one and all.

The basic declaration of faith, not surprising, Shema became the Jewish national credo. No wonder this is so central to Judaism - especially on Yaakov's deathbed as he handed the baton of the Jewish national mission over to his children.

Yaakov who closed the circle on the three Patriarchs internalized within himself the message of G-d's Oneness. His heart and life were one with G-d. Indeed, Yaakov's image was engraved on G-d's Throne of Glory. But when the Divine Presence left him, he thought that not all of his children were up to the task of glorifying the Name of G-d in the universe.

The Tribes answered that this was not so. Assembled and joined together with their saintly father Yaakov, the twelve sons had a unified commitment to achieve this same state of unity with G-d. Appropriately, they declared Shema Yisrael with the pronouncement "Hashem Echad, G-d is One". Our hearts are also one with G-d.

Yaakov, by himself, was able to harmonize all of his powers to embrace the yoke of the Heavenly Kingdom. However it would require the synthesis of all twelve sons of Yaakov, with their very different energies, blessings and personalities, to form a cohesive and united whole, together with their father's legacy, to arrive at the same destination. Yaakov together with his twelve sons comprised of thirteen people - the numerical value of the word "echad, one". The Maharal explains that that this division is precisely reflected in the three letters: aleph=1, cheis=8 and dalet=4 corresponding respectively to Yaakov himself, the eight sons of the Mothers (Rachel and Leah) and to the four sons of the Maidservants (Bilhah and Zilpah).

Hearing their proclamation of the Shema Yisrael and their affirmation of religious commitment, Yaakov recited "Blessed in the Name of his glorious kingdom for all eternity". He was satisfied that his children would indeed live their lives in the acceptance G-d's Sovereignty; that they would promulgate His Holy Name in the World.

Only at the final End of Days, would the task be complete: "Then Hashem will be King over all the world, on that day Hashem will be One and His Name will be One" (Zechariah 14:9). We await that day with great anticipation. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and **Torah.org**.