

A Warm Welcome and Best Wishes to all Students in the Prayer Program

The Sages compare prayer to the ladder in Jacob's dream: "a ladder set on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven" [Genesis 28:12]. Although all people live down here in this earthly world, they have the ability to reach the heavens and experience an encounter with the Infinite. This ladder which mediates between heaven and earth is prayer.

However, anyone who has prayed more than once in his life knows that climbing the ladder is not so easy. In order to pray, we must know before Whom we are standing; have faith that there is meaning to what we are saying; identify with words that we did not write; be able to enter a "praying" frame of mind even at times when it is inconvenient; have the capacity to concentrate for a long time; listen to the words that we are saying; and many, many other similar requirements.

When it comes to anything significant in life, the first step is to give it its due importance, to engage in it, to discuss it with other people and to consider how we can do it better. This is the basis for the idea of *havrutot*, study partners – to talk about prayer with the goal of improving our praying. Understanding the words we say in our prayers is a necessary precondition in order for prayer to move us, and we will give this aspect a central place in our studies. As well as a literal translation of the words, we must also grasp the meaning of each word in the context of the prayer, and what is more, we must try to reach such a level that every word we say in prayer is said with awareness of all its levels of meaning. We will discuss all of the above in *havrutot*, and we will receive further inspiration from lessons given by rabbis who were students of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel.

In hope and prayer that we will improve our ability to pray.

פרשת שמע

דברים פרק ו' פס' ד-ט

(ד) **שמע, ישראל!** מעבר לפנייתו של משה לבני ישראל אל שומעיו הוא מבקש להודיע ברבים את עצם מהותו ואמונתו של העם. משה קובע שתי קביעות: ה' הוא אֱלֹהֵינוּ, וה' הוא אֶחָד.

Shema

DEUTERONOMY 6:4–9

4 Hear, Israel: With these words, Moses was not merely addressing Israel, but also declaring the essence and faith of the people. He made two declarations: **The Lord is our God, and the Lord is one.**

From the (soon to be published) siddur of Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz:

The first verse of the Shema is a testimony, through which the people of Israel attest to their faith in God. The verse is so important that it is repeated not only in prayers and Torah readings, but on occasions involving heightened emotion. The most dramatic example of this is when a martyr delivers his soul over to its Creator: those who sanctified the name of God over the generations uttered this verse as they were about to be executed. Similarly, efforts are made to ensure that a dying individual recites this verse just before he passes.

It is stated in the name of the Ari that when reciting this verse one must identify himself entirely with its message. Consequently, someone who is praying must have in mind that he is ready to give up his life to accept any form of pain and suffering, even death itself, without deviating from the declaration that “the Lord our God, the Lord is one.”

This verse, which is comprised of only six words, can be divided (based on its meaning and cantillation notes) into three parts:

“Hear, Israel” – In the original context of the chapter, this is the summons of Moshe Rabbeinu to all Israel, and separately to each and every individual Jew, to hear what he is saying. This “hearing” (like most uses of the root *shin, mem, ayin* in the Bible) does not merely denote physical hearing; rather, it signifies listening, and also understanding and accepting the message. These words have a slightly different meaning when one reads the Shema, as here they function as a kind of public declaration, to the effect that “all the people of Israel should hear this,” as the speaker is proclaiming and circulating this statement to all who can hear it. This includes, of course, one who is reading the Shema alone – when he says “Hear, Israel,” he is effectively addressing himself.

“The Lord our God” – This is a declaration that we accept upon ourselves the sovereignty and rule of God, which is the essence of “receiving the yolk of Heaven.” Apart from the belief in the existence of God, this is a clear assertion of the relationship between us: He is our God; we are His and He is ours.

“The Lord is one” – This phrase includes both the oneness and unity of God. God is the only one – there are no other gods, and what is more, there is no existence apart from Him. In addition, God is one in that He contains all parts of existence that appear to be separate from each other. The early commentaries likewise explained that when articulating the word *eḥad* [one], a person must have the following intentions, which correspond to the numerical values of its three Hebrew letters [*aleph*, *het*, *dalef*]: He is one (*aleph*) in the seven firmaments and the earth (which together make eight, *het*) and in the four (*dalef*) directions. Since the unity of God is a complicated, multifaceted topic, it was determined as halakha that one must lengthen the pronunciation of *eḥad*, in order to have time to contemplate our beliefs, each person in accordance with their ability.

"ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד"

""Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever

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The sentence “Blessed be the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever” was recited in the Temple whenever the Explicit Name of God [*Shem HaMeforash*] was pronounced, or as a kind of choral refrain of the congregation in response to blessings, in honor of the King’s name (similar to “Amen”). Its incorporation into the reading of the Shema is a way of expressing our assent to the important ideas of the verse we just recited. Furthermore, its meaning completes the message of “Hear, Israel.” In that verse, the unity of God appears in its fullest extent: “There is no other besides Him” – it is as though nothing else exists in relation to Him. In order for that

concept should reach down to our world, we add this statement, which refers to God's relationship with all creation, including our own world. It means that revelation of the kingdom of God, His Presence and His strength, all fill the world – in both time and place – for all time. This sentence is recited quietly, and the Gemara explains that this is because it does not appear in the Torah. However, on another level the reason is due to shame, for when we retreat from our contemplation of the lofty unity of the kingdom of God in the world, we realize how far we are from accepting His sovereignty over us in our daily lives. It is only on Yom Kippur, when we are like the ministering angels, that we can issue this declaration loudly and openly.