

*Our Mutual God - Finding Meaning in Monotheism*

*Shema Israel Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad.  
— Deuteronomy 6:4*

**Is the most important commandment exactly what you think?**

**Our Jewish roots...**Read **Mark 12:28-30**. Compare **Dt 6:4-5**. Consider the fact that Jesus answered exactly as any wise rabbi would have answered.

*“Most Christians probably know that Jesus said loving God wholeheartedly is the most important commandment, and loving our neighbor as we love ourselves is second. But how many of us realize Jesus prefaced both of these with the Shema? It is the first of many examples of Jesus’ fundamental Jewishness... And if, like the rabbis of the Talmud, Jesus places the Shema at the head of the most important commandments, clearly there is something important to be learned from these words.” (TGAM)*

**Source of the name, “shema.”** The word *shema* (pronounced “sh’ma,” with accent on last syllable) means “hear.” The Jewish tradition of naming this verse after that word is consistent with their tradition of naming Bible portions after the first significant word in the text. (They call the creation story in Genesis *bereshit*, for example (“bear-ay-sheet”), which means “in the beginning.”) Rabbinic Judaism considers the *shema* the most important verse in the Bible. Based on **Dt. 6:7**, they recite it before going to sleep and upon waking. Based on **Dt. 6:8**, orthodox Jews place written copies of it in *tefillin* (phylacteries), worn on their foreheads and wrapped around their hands. Based on **Dt. 6:9** they place written copies in *mezuzahs* on their doorframes. Technically, Rabbinic Judaism’s *Shema* also includes the text of **Dt. 6:5-9, 11:13-21** (repeats Dt. 6:5-9 and adds promised blessings and curses) and **Nu. 15:37-41** (requires *tzitzit* “tassles” on corners of garments as reminders of Torah commands).

**Did you know...**There are many extremely close parallels between Rabbinic Judaism’s Talmud and Christianity’s New Testament. Since both books were being written at the same time, it is impossible to know which one influenced the other.

**Greatest commandment—parallels with Judaism.** In the Talmud the Rabbis quote exactly the same verse from Deuteronomy when they, like Jesus, are asked which is the greatest commandment. The Talmud also contains exactly the same words as Jesus spoke in Luke 15:7, and when Hillel, a famous rabbi in the first century, was asked to summarize the Law while standing on one foot, he recited the Golden Rule just as Jesus did, except he framed it in reverse: “That which is not hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor.” (Compare Matthew 7:12)

**GOD LOVES  
AN HONEST QUESTION!**

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**More Jewish roots...**a *midrash* is a teaching in the text based on other scriptures. Sometimes text from different sections of scripture is combined to make a new point. See 1 Corinthians 15:45 for an example.

**Prime example of a *d'rash*.** Jesus' combination of the Deuteronomy 6:4 and Leviticus 19:18 ("love your neighbor as yourself") with the statement that the second is "like" the first is a classic example of Rabbinic Judaism's tradition of examining the Torah on the level of *midrash*, or *d'rash*. Note also that Jesus added "all your mind" to the Torah's version of the greatest commandment. The ancient Hebrews believed the heart was the seat of the intellect. The reason Jesus added this may be found in the physical context of the verses. (See the discussion questions for more.) Discussion questions

- ▶ Why does the Torah place the command to love God wholeheartedly in the context of the *Shema*?
- ▶ Can the *Shema* be separated from the greatest commandment?
- ▶ How should we respond to the fact that Jesus added "all your mind" when he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5?
- ▶ Is the concept of "blind faith" consistent with Christianity?

### The *Shema* in cultural context

**Why does God bother to state that He is "one" in Dt 6:4?** Monotheism may seem obvious to us today, but many Bible scholars believe the ancient Hebrews practiced "henotheism," which is the exclusive allegiance to one god while believing in the existence of other gods. In the Torah God seems to meet his chosen people where they are spiritually, with a series of gradual revelations about His true state of being rather than a total paradigm shift from paganism. We know Abram came from a family that worshipped many gods (**Joshua 24:2**), and twenty-four years after God first called Abram to "leave your country, your people and your father's household" (**Ge 12:1**), Abram still had to be told that the Lord is all-powerful (see **Ge 17:11**, where God tells Abram he is *El Shaddai*, or "God Almighty"). Hundreds of years later, in **Ex 7:16** Abram's descendants still know God as "the LORD the god of the Hebrews" (presumably to differentiate Him from other gods). In **Ex 15:11** it is said, "who among the gods is like you, oh LORD?" God begins the Ten Commandments with "you shall have no other gods before me," which is not a statement that there are no other gods, but a prohibition from worshipping them. Long after the Jewish people have entered the Promised Land, an aged Joshua still feels the need to say, "Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD." (**Joshua 24:14**) Even King Solomon worshipped

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other gods (**1 Kings 11:4**) as did many of the kings who came after him. And as late as the time of Paul, other gods remained a distraction for gentiles who wanted to draw close to the one God of the *Shema* (see **1 Cor 8:6-7**).

- ▶ How does the idea that God gradually revealed his oneness to Abram and the Israelites compare to the common notion of an Old Testament God of fire and brimstone? (Hint: Nehemiah 9:29-31, Exodus 34:6, Acts 17:29-30.)
- ▶ What can be learned about God from the fact that the Hebrew word *echad* in the *Shema* has many of the same meanings as the word “one” in English? (Hint: look up the word, “one” and apply all the definitions to God.)
- ▶ Is there still some confusion about God’s oneness in our culture today? In our churches? In ourselves?