

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

What can the *Shema* teach us about God and morality?

God's state of being is consistent...

"If the Lord is good, he is perfectly good; if he is just, he is perfectly just; and so forth. Otherwise, God would be a composite creature as I am, part good and part bad, sometimes fair and sometimes unfair. But the Shema oneness of God means he is not a consolidation of things, and must therefore be fully and completely whatever he is.... Why does this matter? ...if the God of the Torah is "one" in the sense of flawlessness in both essence and deed...then the Lord will not engage in any halfway measures. He will not be fair today but unfair tomorrow or good now and evil later. In a world of confusion and frightening change...it is a great comfort to believe I can count on God to be completely and consistently what he is, forevermore."

...so the standard of truth and goodness is consistent.

"What is truth?" Pilate asked. (John 18:38) Without the Shema, this is a question without an answer. It is also the question of a thoroughly modern man, indeed, a postmodern man, convinced he can redefine truth to provide the excuse he needs to avoid a messy political situation by sentencing an innocent Jew to death. In contrast, since the giving of the Torah, people of the book have believed that certain truths are self-evident. They faced those truths as something independent of their own convenience. They arranged their lives to accommodate that truth rather than the other way around, and they did that regardless of the personal cost.... Although I enjoy thinking of myself as the center of the universe, that is a foolish fantasy. If the Shema is true, then truth and justice do not depend on me. Like sunlight from the sun, they emanate as fixed realities from a flawless God who is one.... Time is measured by things far beyond my control...the truth about gravity is not relative to humanity. Most things are beyond our control precisely because there is a reality connected with those things—a truth— that is also beyond our control, whether we believe in it or not.... Things are true or false, right or wrong, whether I can see the difference or not, because truth and righteousness ultimately emanate from a single, unchanging source. Thus, the Shema lays the foundation for the Judeo-Christian concept of morality."

"Holy" in Hebrew is *kadosh*. It does not mean "good," or "religious." It means "set apart," or pure. If it was possible for a thing to be purely evil (it is not), that purely evil thing could correctly be called "holy." A glass of water containing only hydrogen and oxygen is "holy" in the literal sense of the word. But allow just one atom of a different element into the glass, and it becomes "*tref*," meaning "unholy, impure, or unclean."

Many philosophers have defined "good" as whatever is balanced (in harmonious moderation) or complete (lacking nothing) in terms of its own kind. This is demonstrated by the fact that whatever is "evil" always represents an

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imbalanced or incomplete (i.e. corrupted) good. Consider these examples of common physical forms of evil: tornados are the result of extreme imbalances in air pressure; earthquakes are the result of imbalanced ground pressure, and cancer is the result of cells with an unbalanced tendency to divide. Also consider these examples of moral evil: lies are corruptions of the truth; envy and greed are corruptions of a desire to live (prosper); adultery is a corruption of marriage. In all of these cases, the evil is an imbalanced form of the balanced good.

- ▶ If “good” means whatever is balanced or complete of its kind, and the *Shema* means God is “one” in the sense of being holy (set apart, pure, perfectly complete), then what does this definition of “good” in combination with the *Shema* tell us about God’s moral condition?
 - ✓ God must be good; He cannot be evil. (“Evil” is a warped or partial good, and “holiness” by definition is never “partial.”)
- ▶ Apply this same *Shema*/holiness logic to God in terms of power, knowledge, time and space. What does it tell you about God?
 - ✓ God’s “oneness” according to the *Shema* also means He is omnipotent, omniscient, immortal and omnipresent, because He is in pure (“holy”) equilibrium (goodness/balance) in terms of power, knowledge, time and space.
- ▶ While philosophy defines “good” as whatever is balanced or complete in terms of its own kind, Christian theology defines “good” as “the will of God.” Given your discussion up to here, is there a substantive difference in these definitions, or is the difference mainly one of semantics? (Hints: remember the *Shema*’s teaching about God’s holiness, and see **Mark 10:18**.)
 - ✓ There is no difference in these definitions.
 - Just as only chickens hatch from chicken eggs, so only good could proceed out from a good God who is completely “one” in the *Shema*’s sense, because anything “not good” would have to proceed from something “not good” at its source, yet we have already seen the *Shema* means God is good, and there is no “not good” in Him.
 - Therefore the will of God, which flows from his unified oneness, is identical with the definition of goodness as “balanced or complete.”
 - ✓ God is the only perfectly good thing.
- ▶ How do people usually define what is good and what is not?
 - ✓ We tend to consider anything that makes us happy “good,” and anything that is inconvenient or painful, “evil”. This means:
- ▶ How does this usual definition compare with the *Shema* definition of “good” compare with our usual opinion of what is good and what is not, and what does this comparison reveal about our understanding of the *Shema*, God and ourselves?
 - ✓ We do not really believe the *Shema*, because if we did we would not base good and evil on ourselves, but on God alone, and:

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- ✓ We are still henotheists (viewing ourselves as gods alongside God).
- ▶ Given God's attributes of omnipresence and immortality derived from the *Shema*, what can we conclude about whether God is in contact with the universe all these years after having created it?
 - ✓ If he is omnipresent and immortal, then he remains in full contact (He in all space) with the universe here and now (He is in all time).
- ▶ Given God's moral condition and your answer to the question immediately above, what can you say about the nature of God's contact with creation (and especially humanity) in the context of the *Shema*? What does this mean to you personally? (Hint: **Jer 29:11**.)
 - ✓ We have seen that God is good; He is in full contact with His Creation and He is in the here and now, therefore God is with us every moment, in actual time and space with us, and His intentions toward us are always good.

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