

Tefillah Focus Of The Week:

שמע

What the Jewish People Know

MEANING: The simple translation of the prayer

Hear, O Israel: Hashem is our G-d, Hashem, the One and Only.

שמע ישראל,
ה' אלקינו, ה' אחד.

WORD TO THE WISE: Meaning within the word

שמע ישראל, ה' אלקינו,
ה' אחד, Hear, O Israel.
Hashem is our G-d,
Hashem, the One and Only.

this tradition, the revelation will remain the indisputable basis for all the thoughts and actions of every person of the Jewish faith for all eternity.

Therefore, the verse says שמע ישראל, Hear, O Israel, that ה' אלקינו ה' אחד, Hashem is our G-d, the One and Only. G-d revealed Himself to our fathers with a certainty that transcends conclusions reached by speculative inferences and deductions. All of them together became aware of G-d via sensory perception which eliminated any possible doubt. This awareness was granted to them so that they should transmit it to their children after them. Each generation is a vital link in the chain that carries to future generations the knowledge that ה' אלקינו ה' אחד (The Hirsch Chumash, Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch, Sefer Devarim 6:4, Feldheim Publishers).

The שמע prayer is the essential expression of a Jew's relationship with Hashem, the embodiment of *emunah* -- our belief that the G-d of Israel is the only power that exists in any realm of earth and Heaven. If that is so, why not use the Hebrew word *ta'amin*, you should believe? The truth is that our knowledge of G-d was obtained at Mount Sinai by the actual sensory experience of the whole Jewish nation. It was there that G-d revealed Himself to His people. Henceforth, one generation shall tell another about G-d's revelation. One community shall attest to another with certainty that G-d exists. By means of

THEME:

An essential concept of the prayer

Hearing Is Believing

The Jewish belief in G-d is firmly grounded in our ancestors' personal, sensory experience of revelation.

INSIGHT:

Deeper meanings of the theme

Emunah Woven Into Life

Why is שמע so prominent in our lives? The first verse of the שמע is taught to a child as soon as he is old enough to talk (*Yorah Deah, Siman 245, Se'if 5*). Every day of a person's life begins with the שמע recited in the Shacharis prayer and ends with the שמע of the evening Maariv prayer.

inscribed with the words of this prayer.

The reason for the prominence of the שמע is that it expresses the central tenet of a Jew's faith, establishing our status as the devoted subjects of the One, All-Powerful King. The שמע includes two distinct declarations. The first is embodied in the words "ה' אלקינו" – Hashem, our G-d – which constitutes our acceptance of the yoke of Divine Kingship. The second declaration, "ה' אחד," Hashem is One, affirms our belief that there is no other power or Creator other than G-d.

Hashem provides us with multiple daily opportunities to bolster *emunah* – the essential nutrient of our spiritual lives which is so central to a Jew's entire mission in life. The words of the שמע express our faith and reinforce it as well, giving vitality to every aspect of our Torah learning, mitzvos and prayer.

שמע also frames the important milestones of life. It is with שמע that we welcome a newborn at the *vachnacht*—the night before his *bris*. The recital of שמע during the Maariv prayer is the first mitzvah that a bar-mitzvah boy performs upon becoming thirteen years old. The first lesson a child learns in *Torah She'ba'al Peh*, the Oral Law, is the laws of reciting the שמע recorded in the first tractate *Berachos*. Every time one enters or leaves a Jewish home, he acknowledges the words of the שמע by placing his hand on the cover of the mezuzah (*Rama, Yorah Deah, Siman 285, Se'if 2*), which contains a scroll

VISUALIZE:

Images that bring the prayer to life

Sensory Emunah

Imagine that Reuven had never seen, touched or tasted bread. He asks his friend Shimon, "What is bread?" and Shimon launches into a vivid, detailed description of its smell, taste and texture. Now, if someone were to ask Reuven what bread is, Reuven would have a fairly complete answer to offer. However, his knowledge is lodged in his



head only. If Levi were to come along and tell Reuven that he's got it all wrong, that bread is really something altogether different than what he thinks, Reuven would have no basis upon which to know which version is true.

On the other hand, if Reuven has seen and tasted bread

even just once in his life, he cannot be dissuaded from his understanding of what it is.

"Hear, O Israel" is the Jewish people's "taste" of G-d. From that experience, we cannot be dissuaded from our understanding of Who He is and what His relationship is to us. Our faith is not only in our head; it is installed within our senses and therefore, rooted deeply in our hearts.

Try This!

▶ When Hashem gave the Jewish people the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai, He did so with a voice they could perceive with their own ears. Imagine living at that time, and actually "hearing" G-d, when you say the words שמע ישראל.

Did You Know

▶ *Plus Three*

When praying without a minyan, the three words א-ל-ל מלך נאמן are recited before שמע is begun. If a minyan is present, the congregation listens to the chazzan's repetition of the three words at the end of שמע.

א-ל-ל מלך נאמן were chosen because their initials spell אמן, meaning "it is true," thus testifying to our faith in the truths included in שמע.

The words א-ל-ל מלך נאמן mean Hashem is א-ל, G-d, the all-powerful source of all mercy. He is the מלך, King, Who rules, leads, and exercises supervision over all. Hashem is also נאמן, trustworthy, apportioning no more suffering nor less good than one deserves (*Anaf Yosef*).

The Sages teach that there are 248 organs in the human body and 248 positive commandments. This parallel number symbolizes that the purpose of our physical existence is to obey the precepts of the Torah. The total number of words in the three paragraphs of שמע is 245. As the Sages wished to convey the above symbolism in the recitation of the שמע, they added the three words to שמע.

Praying With Passion is a free weekly e-mail newsletter by the author of *Praying With Fire* (Vols 1 & 2) and *Yearning With Fire*.

To sponsor an issue of *Praying With Passion*, please call: 201.837.0354 or email info@prayingwithfire.org