

If we only went to Saturday morning services once per year, this Shabbat would be a pretty good one to visit. The Torah portion Va'etchanan includes the Ten Commandments and the Shema Yisrael, two of the most essential building blocks of Jewish learning. Because I just completed a multi-week presentation of the Ten Commandments at Wednesday's Lunch and Learn, I'll look tonight at the Shema Yisrael, and in the interests of time, I'll focus on just one word, the first word, Shema. Like so many key words in Hebrew, Shema has several usages in English. The most basic is the one we know best, Hear. That's Hear H-E-A-R, not HERE H-E-R-E. And if you grew up with the translation, Hear, O Israel, you might have thought when you were a kid we were saying HERO Israel– H-E-R-O. Shema can simply mean Hear. You can hear my voice, you can hear the air conditioning, you can hear the peaceful snoring of the person sitting behind you. It doesn't take any effort to hear. Our ears just do it automatically, whether it's noise, sound, music, or words. I think that is too passive for such an important religious command, and that's why I think we should consider a second meaning of Shema, Listen. To listen also involves the ears, but listening is something we do actively. It requires attention and some degree of concentration. We hear music in an elevator, but we listen to music at a concert. To listen, we must put something of ourselves into it. Shema Yisrael. Listen Israel: take note. Pay heed. It's an unmistakable introduction to what follows.

The Torah takes this sense one step further. It presumes that to listen is to acknowledge the power of the message we are hearing. So there is an extension of the meaning of Shema to include obedience. If we truly listen to what God says, we will no doubt follow it. So Shema can mean obey. This is probably the meaning Moses had in mind each time he used it. Not just to hear, not just to listen, but to come along and do all that is being asked.

One of my Hebrew teachers, a poet, pointed out that in proper Hebrew, one doesn't say, Ani Meivin Ivrit – I understand Hebrew, but rather, Ani Shomea Ivrit – I hear Hebrew. Shomea is from the same root as Shema, and this usage sheds light on the degrees of meaning contained in this root. When someone is speaking a language totally foreign to us, we can certainly hear them, but even if we try to listen to them, we can't understand them. Yet if they switch to a language we do know, all of a sudden the noises coming out of their mouth carry meaning. We understand them. This is how to interpret the statement our ancestors made upon receiving the Ten Commandments. They said Na'aseh V'nishma – we will do it, and we will understand. The

rabbis take this to mean that sometimes, we can't understand the significance of a mitzvah until after we have performed it.

As Jews, we are offered the mitzvah of reciting the Shema Yisraeil every evening and every morning of our lives. Each time we do, let us try to hold the full flavor of the word Shema as we pronounce it – the hearing of the Torah's command, the listening to its power, the understanding of its message, and the obedience to its truth. And by pronouncing the words of the Shema, just as our ancestors did, we are also lending to it a fifth meaning. It's not another translation of the Hebrew, it is a sense we give to the words by saying them out loud. It is the meaning of Identity. We say to ourselves, to each other, to the world, I am Israel when we say Shema Yisraeil. We declare that we are part of the Jewish people, a people linked to God and to each other by those six timeless Hebrew words. Shema Yisraeil becomes for us not just a statement to hear, but a statement to make heard. Shema Yisraeil – Listen Israel, Listen world, Adonai Eloheinu – Adonai is our God. Adonai is the God that defines us as a People. Adonai Echad – Adonai is One and our people is One.

Baruch Shem Kavod Malchuto L'olam Va'ed!