

# The Shema

This week's reading includes the Shema. "Listen Israel, God is your God and there is only One God." Here we have the very core of Jewish ideas. We do not have complicated theologies telling us in detail how and what to believe, just these very basic general concepts.

In the Shema we are asked simply to accept the existential reality of God as the core of our identity as Jews. God is connected to Israel, the underlying principle of the identity of the Jewish people. Saying the God is ours is a declaration of identity as a person and as a people.

It is up to each one of us to work out how and what this means to us.

We have God, Israel and One. What does that mean? God requires obedience to this single idea. You can't be loyal to conflicting interests. Loyalty has to be unique. That means not worshipping other gods, other values, other ways of life. "one" is understood by the philosophers to mean some positive characteristic. Maimonides calls it a "Perfect Unity."

I am not sure I know what the difference is between a unity and perfect unity. Another explanation is that God is the single, overriding guiding principle of our lives. In ancient Mesopotamia, all kings called themselves One. Meaning the most important of all. The Torah does not say there are no other gods. After all we make gods of all kinds of things all the time. Money, fashion, ambition. It simply says that "You should have no other gods." You should not let whatever else you make a priority in your lives come before God.

Both of these are so hard and yet both are so rewarding. But they involve making positive decisions. They don't happen accidentally or without effort. Repeating the Shema as often as we do, is a reminder to commit. To be part of a great spiritual and physical project.

It is this phrase that has been the rallying cry of Jews over the centuries. It is the statement that those who were killed for being Jewish made before they died. It asserts what makes us different to Christianity, Islam and all other religions. Unlike other religions we do not believe in trying to impose ours on others. Our mission is to keep our tradition alive.

The Shema continues by saying that the way to do this is through thinking daily and practicing our tradition and above all by passing it on to our children. The way to do this is by showing them a warm loving Jewish home based on knowledge and commitment. The Shema says that we should love God. A relationship based on love is likely to produce far better results than one based on fear.