

Erev Rosh Hashana 5777
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Shema

Recently I wrote a little piece for the weekly Shirat Hayam blog on the Shema. (Btw, if you are not receiving please let one of the ushers know or sending me an email later on so we can get you subscribed.) I highlighted the fact that the Shema is without a doubt the single most recognized and memorized verse in the entire Hebrew Bible. I am more than confident that 99% of you here in this room can recite and translate it from memory. Indeed, traditionally the Shema is the first bit of Torah a young child learns and the last words a Jew speaks before dying. Figuratively speaking, Judaism begins and ends with the Shema.

Traditionally, we are taught that the underlying importance of the Shema is its monotheistic claim of oneness: Hear O Israel, Adonai your God, Adonai is one. The problem with this explanation is that the Shema doesn't actually say there is only one God. It can just as easily be saying, "Israel, there is only one of your God," implying that for other people there are multiple Gods. It could also mean something like "Hey Israel, I am your God and I'm alone come be with me". I don't want to take you down the rabbit hole called theology. Instead, I want to draw your attention to just the word Shema.

Shema is probably the second most recognized word in the entire Hebrew Bible. The first has to be shalom. Shema, as you know it means to hear or listen. Yes, literally that what Shema means. But this is too simplistic of a translation. To give you a deeper sense of what Shema really means consider how the [Brown, Driver, and Briggs Hebrew/English Lexicon](#) defines it: to "**hear with attention, interest**". Shema is not just the physical phenomenon of sound waves traveling into the ear canal until they reach the eardrum; then via vibrations passing through the middle ear bones into the inner ear and so forth. Shema means to really pay attention and listen with genuine interest. It means to be focused intensely on what or who you are listen to.

To have someone listen to you with attention and interest is a powerful experience. And sadly, it is also pretty uncommon. More often than not we are barely paying attention

when think we are listening to someone else. Here are some tell tale signs that you're not really listening. If you are formulating a response to the person speaking to you before s/he has stopped speaking, you're not listening. Even if we are not formulating a response while preening to listen, we may still be thinking of other things, albeit subconsciously. During a conversation, how often have thoughts such as "What am I going to have for dinner," "What do I want to do this weekend?" or "I hope I am not late picking the kids again" crossed your mind? At such times, we are distracted and not giving our full attention to what is being said. In other words we are not actively listening to the speaker. We are not fulfilling the most fundamental mitzvah: Shema, listening with attention and interest.

I remember when I was young how I would start talking to mom about whatever was on my mind. She was often reading or pretending to read as I rambled on. Of course, I thought what I had to say was important so it would greatly annoy me that she seemed to just keep on reading. So I would stop and whine that she wasn't listening to me. Of course she would say she was though I didn't really believe her. Then one day when I felt this was happening again I just stopped and walked away. Secretly I was hoping against all odds that she would say something like "go on" or "why did you stop". But she didn't. In fairness this was not a defining moment in my relationship with my mom but since I still remember the feeling of being ignored I can say it was a powerful learning experience for me.

Let's be honest. We've all experienced how unpleasant it feels to try and have a conversation with someone who is obviously not really listening to what we want to share. Notice I said what we want to share and not just what we want to say. When we are talking with someone we are sharing something that is important to us. Maybe it is not the most important bit of information but it is nevertheless something we choose to share. Listening with attention and interest is not necessarily hard to do, though for most of us it takes some practice and for all of us a degree of vigilance.

Since Shema is so central to Judaism I thought it might be empowering for us as a community to take some time this evening and practice listening with attention and interest ... to each other. Me standing up here and sermonizing does not make for a good opportunity to engage in serious listening. So here's what I'm going to ask you to do. Please pay attention as it involves several steps.

- 1) Do nothing until I finish explaining all of the steps.
- 2) Find a passage, any passage that speaks to you. It can be from the body of the liturgy or be a commentary , etc. By "speaking" to you I mean it catches and holds your attention. Within the two minutes I'm going to give you find this passage also try and identify what it is about it that caught and held your attention.
- 3) After the two minutes are up please stand up and look around you. Partner up with someone, preferably someone you don't know well or haven't seen for a while.
- 4) Introduce yourselves, share as little or much as you like.
- 5) You now have two minutes each to share with your partner what passage you chose and why you chose it.
- 6) Person sharing, take a risk and be honest about your choice.
- 7) Listener, strive to listen with real attention and interest.
- 8) When the time allotted for each of you to share/listen is up please stay where you are.
- 9) Okay, you now have two minutes to find the passage that speaks to you.

How hard was it to listen with attention and interest?

How did it feel to have someone listen to you with attention and interest?

Release people to their seats: conclude by teaching the Shema a sign language explaining that by signing it we move towards embodying its meaning.