

## The Shema

*"Listen, Israel"*. So begins the most famous and most important Jewish prayer. In Hebrew, that's "Shema Yisrael", which gives the prayer its name.

That's just the opening though, a bit like God's clearing his throat. It's the next couple of lines that make it not just a prayer, but *the* prayer.

Why?

Well, it starts with, *"God is our Lord, God is One"*, which nails monotheism in seven words. Not bad for starters. And then goes on to say, *"Love God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might"*. That, right there, for Jewish people, is the purpose of life in one sentence.

What it means is that the most important thing in life is devotion to God. Beautifully simple, really. But life being what it is – a bit chaotic, and people being what they are – rather easily distracted, it's horribly easy to forget. That's why the rest of the prayer is a sort of instruction manual for everyday life.

First, it says that the prayer must be taught to children, which is very practical. It would make no sense for God to get the first generation of his chosen people up to speed on the whole meaning of life thing, if they then forgot to pass it on.

It goes on to instruct that the prayer be recited, *"when you are at home, when travelling on the road, when you lie down, and when you get up"*. So pretty much all the time, really.

Orthodox Jews recite the prayer in the morning, evening, and they may well also recite it many times in the day.

You could be forgiven for thinking that repeating the prayer with this sort of impressive frequency might be enough to ensure a steady mindfulness of God's existence. Well, no.

The Shema goes on to instruct that tefillin, mezuzah and tzitzit are also needed.

Tefillin are small leather boxes, made to contain tiny scrolls, which have had particular prayers written onto them using a special ink. When praying, the devout tie the tefillin onto their arms and their foreheads, to remind them that God must be in their minds and their hearts.

Mezuzah are also containers of holy scrolls, but they're not for the body, they're for houses.

# Bitesize

The scrolls inside them are inscribed with the words of the Shema, and they're fixed to the doorframes of all the doors in a dwelling. Except the bathroom. God isn't so keen on bathrooms.

And tzitzit are specially knotted tassles on the tallith, which serve as reminders of the Ten Commandments. They're part of the clothing that the truly observant must wear while praying, along with the kippah to cover the head.

So, the Shema really is woven into Jewish life, and it's key to understanding Judaism, because God's message to the Jews wasn't, "Congratulations, you're the chosen people, well done". It was more that he'd revealed to them the hidden truth of creation, but demanded that they strive constantly to understand and, above all, remember.