"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One"

Shema Israel Prayer

### **MEANING AND ORIGINS**

*Shema* (Hebrew for "hear") is a shortened form of the full prayer that appears in Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21, as well as Numbers 15:37-41. According to the [Talmud](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-the-talmud-2076798) (*Sukkah* 42a and *Brachot* 13b), the recitation comprised only one line:

The *Shema* itself clearly says **"when you lie down and when you rise up,"** which would suggest that one should say the blessing in the morning and in the evening.

In the Talmud, there's a discussion about what constitutes evening and, ultimately, it's connected to the rhythms of the priests at the Temple in Jerusalem.

According to the Talmud, the *Shema* was recited when the [Kohanim (priests)](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/12358-priest) went to the Temple to eat the offering for being ritually impure. The discussion then went into just about what time that was, and concluded that it was around the time that three stars were visible. As for the morning, the *Shema* can be recited at first light.

Since the *Shema* reaffirms the basic tenets of Jewish faith, it is important to hear clearly what one is saying. The *Shema* may be said while **standing or sitting.**

The Jews of Israel used to stand to show the *Shema*'s importance and to demonstrate that saying *Shema* is an act of testifying in God (testimony in a Jewish court is always given while standing).

## **Kavanah**

1. When one recites the Shema, he should do so tremulously, with concentration, reverence and awe, as people are wont to do when reading a new communication issued by the king. The message of Shema should always be considered precious, like a new message each day, not like an old message that has become stale.
2. Before beginning to read the Shema, one should take a moment to contemplate that he is now going to fulfill G‑d's commandment.In addition, one must concentrate on the meaning of Shema's words, at the very least while reciting the verse of Shema. If one did not concentrate on the meaning of the words of this verse, he must repeat it. (If one therefore says the verse twice in a row, he should say it quietly the second time.
3. Although one should continue concentrating on the meaning of the words for the rest of Shema, if one didn't do so, he has still fulfilled the mitzvah.
4. It is important to have in mind the meanings of the names of G‑d employed in the verse of Shema. The Tetragrammaton (pronounced "*Adonai*") implies that G‑d was, is, and will always be—at once (i.e., He is beyond time), and that He is the Master of all. The name *Elohim* (or *Eloheinu*) alludes to His strength and power, and that He has the ability to carry out His will in the upper and lower worlds.
5. Every Hebrew letter also has a numerical value. When saying *echad*("one"), a person should concentrate on the fact that G‑d is the only One (*alef*) in the seven heavens and in the earth (together these equal *chet*, eight) as well as in all four directions (*dalet*).These three letters spell *echad*.
6. "Whoever lengthens the word *echad* is rewarded with a long life."This refers to one who spends time on the aforementioned meditation.
7. When one says the verse of *Ve'ohavtah* ("and you shall love G‑d"), he should try to actually introduce love of G‑d into his heart.
8. In order to enhance concentration, one may not do anything or even motion to others while reciting the first section of Shema. While reciting the second and third sections, one may motion to another if it is for the purpose of a mitzvah. For this reason, one should not recite the Shema while driving.

**How to Recite the Shema**

1. One may recite the Shema while sitting or standing. Some permit reciting the Shema while laying on one's side. Others only permit this in cases of need. One should not go out of his way to stand for the Shema as our Sages did not require this.
2. One who is walking should stop walking while reciting the first verse and *Baruch Shem* and may then continue walking while reciting the remainder.
3. One should cover his eyes with his right hand while saying the verse of Shema in order to reduce distractions and enhance concentration.For the same reason, the first verse should be said aloud.
4. One should say the first verse as follows: *Shema Yisrael* (Hear O Israel), pause, *Adonai Eloheinu* (the L-rd is our G‑d), pause, *Adonai echad* (the L-rd is one). The pauses emphasize the meaning of the words.
5. The second verse ("*Baruch shem*…") is recited in an undertone, except on Yom Kippur when it is recited out loud.
6. One should be careful to enunciate each word and letter of the Shema properly.
7. When saying the morning Shema, men should hold their *tzitzit* and kiss them at certain intervals. See the instructions in the prayebook for more information.
8. If one is praying with a *minyan*, at the end of Shema, one should listen to the cantor repeat the last three words ("*Adonai Eloheichem emet*").
9. Our sages tell us that the 248 words of the Shema correspond to the 248 limbs in the (male) body. Each limb is healed by one of the words of Shema. Since the Shema actually only contains 245 words, the *chazzan* repeats the last three words in order to reach the total number of 248. The congregation should listen to these words, even if they have not yet finished reciting the Shema, but they do not repeat them themselves.
10. If someone is saying the Shema without a *minyan*, Chabad custom is for the individual to repeat the words "*ani Adonai Eloheichem"* twice.