

שמע

Shema'

THE *SHEMA'*, or the proclamation "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One," stands at the center of Jewish worship. The most essential declaration of Jewish faith is learned early in childhood. Pious Jews hope that it will be the last phrase they utter before they die. "His soul went out with the word 'One'" is often found in descriptions of martyrs' deaths.

The *shema'* actually consists of three Biblical passages: Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41. The daily recitation of these passages is considered a Biblically ordained precept ("You shall speak of them . . . when you lie down and when you rise up" [Deuteronomy 6:7]). Although surrounded by prayers, the *shema'* itself is not a prayer. It is addressed to one's fellow Jews, and perhaps also to some broader notion of "Israel" (*yisra'el**). It proclaims God's Oneness, the obligation to love and serve God through the commandments, a warning that satiety due to too much worldly prosperity may lead one to turn away from God, and a faith that righteousness is ultimately rewarded. The *shema'* concludes with an admonition to be holy and to remember that the Lord brought Israel forth from Egypt (*Mitsrayim**) in order to be our God.

It is the first declaration of the *shema'*, however, by which it is best known. The *shema'* is referred to as the proclamation of Divine Oneness. God is One, the Source of all being. There is no demonic realm outside of God, there is no profane or "secular" realm where God's presence cannot be found. God's oneness includes and embraces all; everything exists within God. This interpretation of the *shema'* is perhaps best expressed in the words

of a Hasidic master (Rabbi Judah Leib Alter of Ger, 1847-1904, author of *Sefat Emet*):

The proclamation of oneness that we declare each day in saying "Hear O Israel," and so forth, really needs to be understood as it truly is. That which is entirely clear to me . . . based on the holy writings of great Kabbalists, I am obligated to reveal to you . . . the meaning of "Y-H-W-H* is one" is not that He is the only God, negating other gods (though this too is true!), but the meaning is deeper than that: there is no being other than Him. [This is true] even though it seems otherwise to most people. . . . everything that exists in the world, spiritual and physical, is God Himself. It is only because of the contraction (*tsimtsum**) that was God's will, blessed be He and His name, that holiness descended rung after rung, until actual physical things were formed out of it.

These things are true without a doubt. Because of this, every person can attach himself [to God] wherever he is, through the holiness that exists within every single thing, even corporeal things. You only have to be negated in the spark of holiness. In this way you bring about ascents in the upper worlds, causing true pleasure to God. A person in such a state lacks for nothing, for he can attach himself to God through whatever place he is. This is the foundation of all the mystical formulations in the world.