

Shema
Rabbi Megan Brumer
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In this week's Torah portion, we find one of the core prayers in our tradition, Shema.

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.—Here O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

The Shema begins with a simple yet profound word: Shema—listen. But this word isn't just about hearing with our ears. It's about paying deep attention. About noticing. About being fully present.

But what does it really mean to listen—not just to sound, but to the world around us?

The anecdote that follows helps explore this question.

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I would like to share a story about a queen. This particular queen was quite spiritual in nature, and for a long time she had been bothered by one particular question.

She wanted to pray, but she was worried that she might do it wrong. She had no idea where to start. And that was her question: What is the best sound with which to approach prayer?

She put the word out to her subjects: What is the best sound with which to approach prayer?

She sent messages to all of the clergy and scholars in her queendom and convened them in the royal courtyard one week later.

It was a large gathering. There were highly spiritual teachers from all faiths and cultures.

One leader stood up and said: "The best sound with which to approach prayer is *shhh*. Before we can pray, we have to quiet our outside thoughts. We have to get rid of all of our expectations, our preconceived notions, the stress of the day. Leave everything else behind and *shhh*. Just be."

While the queen was considering this option, another scholar jumped up from the crowd and said: "No, Your Highness, the best sound with which to approach prayer is *mmm*. Prayer takes thought and intention. It takes attention. One needs to ponder, question, challenge, and think. Think *mmm*."

Now the queen was confused. Which was the best sound with which to approach prayer *shhh*? Or perhaps it was *mmm*?

As she was thinking, a third leader spoke up and said: "The other two have it all wrong, Your Highness. The goal of prayer is to reach a higher level of awareness—of awakesness. One needs to go in with an open heart and expect to leave with a moment of light. The correct sound with which to approach prayer is definitely *ahh*."

Now the queen really didn't know what to do. Which was it? *Shhh*? *Mmm*? *Ahh*?

To bring one's full presence, to have permission to question, ponder, doubt, and to leave changed or awakened in some way.

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As we pray Shema tonight, I invite you to carry these sounds with you:

Shhh—let yourself quiet down, even just a little. Notice what you hear.

Mmm—bring your intentions, your thoughts, your heart.

Ahh—open your heart to prayers, to the possibility of wonder.

Shema means to listen—with your ears, with your heart, with your whole self.

Let's listen—and pray—together.