

Discussion Guide

Preface

- What is the difficulty in translating the *Sh'ma*?
- What are the different possible meanings of the word “hear”?
- Why is it important to try to understand what we are saying when we recite the *Sh'ma*?

Chapter 1: Fighting Idolatry

- What was the original meaning of the *Sh'ma* as said by Moses?
- What challenges did King Josiah face that Moses did not? Why?
- How long did it take for monotheism to take hold in the Israelites' understanding of God?
- What revolutionary claims did the prophets of Israel make, especially when the surrounding empires destroyed Israelite sovereignty?
- What forms did idolatry take in the Bible? Do some still exist today?

Chapter 2: The Sages Offer Their Lives

- What kind of person was Rabbi Akiba? In the face of Roman persecution, why was Rabbi Akiba's martyrdom inevitable?
- What does “spiritual resistance” mean? What does it mean to say the *Sh'ma* as protest?

- What are some of the meanings behind the phrase “the world-to-come”?
- What did the Jews who died in the Crusades have in common with Rabbi Akiba? What was different about their circumstances?
- Do you feel an obligation to past Jewish martyrs? Why or why not?

Chapter 3: Proving the One

- What were some of the major changes in the world that had occurred by the time of Saadia Gaon?
- What kind of person was Saadia Gaon? How did this shape his writing?
- What are Saadia’s four proofs for creation?
- Explain Rabbi Akiba and Bachya ibn Pakuda’s proofs. How are they similar and different to Saadia’s and to each other?
- How is the idea of God as Creator linked to the *Sh’ma*’s statement that God is one?

Chapter 4: Nothing Like God

- According to Maimonides, why should we be perplexed?
- What was troubling to Maimonides about anthropomorphisms in the Bible?
- What does it mean that God is “wholly unique”? How does this relate to the *Sh’ma*?
- What problems arise with language when trying to talk about God?
- According to Maimonides, what does it mean that human beings are made in the divine image?

Chapter 5: Communing with the One

- What kind of lifestyle did the mystics of Safed lead?
- What historical circumstances shaped the birth of Kabbalah?
- How did the kabbalists think about gender? How was this represented in the *Sh’ma*?
- How did the kabbalists talk about God’s presence in the world?

- What was the meaning of *tikkun olam* to the kabbalists?

Chapter 6: “Master of the Universe”

- What was scandalous about Moses Haim Luzzatto’s life?
- What did Luzzatto mean when he understood God to be the Ruler of the universe?
- How did Luzzatto explain the existence of chaos in the world?
- What role did the Messiah play in Luzzatto’s thinking? How is this connected to saying the *Sh’ma*?
- What other people have proposed that the world runs according to a divine pattern? How are their ideas similar to or different from Luzzatto’s?

Chapter 7: A Nation Reborn

- What risks did Abraham Isaac Kook take in his life? Why?
- What did the unity represented in the *Sh’ma* mean to Kook (a) for the individual, (b) for the nation of Israel, and (c) for the world?
- What ethical values are a consequence of Kook’s understanding of the *Sh’ma*?
- How did Kook try to live out these values in his life?
- What do you think Kook would say about the State of Israel today? Why?

Chapter 8: One Moral Standard

- How was Leo Baeck able to say the *Sh’ma* during the Shoah?
- What paradoxical meaning did the *Sh’ma* have for Baeck?
- What are some of the Shoah’s challenges to Jewish theology and the idea of God’s oneness?
- How did Emil Fackenheim try to resolve some of the Shoah’s theological challenges?
- What does it mean that “monotheism demands one moral standard”?

Chapter 9: A Prophecy—“One World or No World”

- How was the *Sh'ma* related in Abraham Joshua Heschel's mind to his march on Selma?
- What are the definitions of “God is one” that Heschel offers? How does divine concern contradict some of Heschel's predecessors? What did Heschel mean when he wrote, “God is alive”?
- What is “the ineffable”? Describe moments that might foster “radical amazement.”
- What is “divine pathos”? How does it relate to the life of the prophet?
- According to Heschel, how is the *Sh'ma* related to social action?

Chapter 10: “Hearing” Today

- Which figures are most meaningful to you of those presented here? Why?
- Who historically has been missing from the writing of Jewish theology?
- During what ritual moments do Jews invoke the *Sh'ma*?
- How is the idea of being a witness emphasized in the appearance of the *Sh'ma* in the Torah scroll?
- How is saying the *Sh'ma* related to facing death? Does this have personal meaning for you?
- How does the wording of the *Sh'ma* permit us to “struggle with God”?