

Meditation and the Shema

What is meditation?

Meditation usually refers to a state of extreme relaxation and concentration, in which the body is generally at rest and the mind quieted of surface thoughts.

How are Jewish prayer and meditation linked?

Prayer is not just about reciting words from a *siddur*, or even just about talking to G-d. The Hebrew words for prayer give us a clue as to the nature of Jewish prayer and how it is supposed to be a reflective, meditative and introspective process.

להתפלל – *l'hitpalel* means to pray but is in the reflexive form of the verb (something we do to ourselves). The simple form of the verb (**לפלל**) means to judge, decide so the reflexive literally means to judge oneself, to take stock of one's actions. This aspect of prayer therefore refers to an act of introspection.

להתבונן – *l'hitbonen* from the root **בין**. Again, the simple verb form (**לבין**) means to understand, know, discern but here the reflexive form literally means to know oneself. Prayer should help us understand ourselves better.

להתבודד – *l'hitboded* from the root **בדד**. The simple verb (**לבדד**) means to be alone. Once again, the reflexive verb literally means to seclude oneself. Prayer is a very private and personal act. Nevertheless, we pray as a community so this concept can not mean to pray alone.

Instead, it means that at the moments of pray, we insulate ourselves from our surroundings and focus our thoughts towards our prayers. Some people may close their eyes to shut out their surroundings to create a personal isolation.

Reading and understanding the Shema

The ideas below relate to the verses of the first paragraph of the *shema* on pages 3 and 4 in two different formats. The Shema is traditionally recited in the morning and evening but can be said at any time.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

The first line speaks about the oneness of G-d. Not only that there is one G-d but that He and the Universe are one. He is infinite and so all space and matter which makes up our universe is not only a creation of G-d but in some way part of Him. This should make us feel small and insignificant, but in reality, the fact that we have a soul connects us to G-d on a very high level.

בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מְלָכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

The next line was not part of the Torah, but added into the recitation of the *shema* to express the eternity of G-d and His Kingdom. Not only is G-d infinite and non-corporeal, so not bound by space, but He is eternal – He exists above time and is not bound by a past or future.

וְאַהֲבַתְּ אֶת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ:

This verse speaks about taking every physical and spiritual aspect of lives – our hearts (minds), bodies and our resources and dedicating them to G-d. While this is the ideal goal, it is not something that can be achieved quickly, yet the process should lead us to love G-d and want to grow.

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ:

The next verse relates back to the previous one about dedicating our lives to G-d. The verse commands us to place these words (the commandments that lead us to connect with G-d) upon our hearts. In order for the verse to be speaking about taking these commandments on board and doing them, we would have expected it to say ‘place these words *in* your hearts’, not ‘*upon* your hearts’. Our sages explained that we may not yet be ready to assimilate these commandments and change our lives right now. We must however place the words upon our hearts so they may be absorbed slowly over time.

Growth is a slow process – we might be able to microwave a potato and make baked potatoes, but you can’t microwave a seed into a plant. It needs the right conditions to grow; nutrients, oxygen, water, the right temperature and climate and so on. Over time, given the right conditions just as the plant will grow, so too, the words of Torah will enter our hearts and help us to grow closer to G-d.

וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָנֵיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִקְחֶתְךָ בְּדַרְדָּרְךָ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

We have an obligation to educate the next generations - our children and grandchildren. Not only that but we should ensure that Judaism is brought from the synagogue, into our homes. Judaism was never an exclusively synagogue based religion. On the contrary, the Ark of the Covenant, the holiest item in the Temple represented the Jewish family. There is so much we can do as a family to celebrate our Judaism and this serves to bring our families together.

וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:

This verse refers to the commandment for men to wear *tefillin*. However, the idea is not only related to men. *Tefillin* are bound on the arm and the head representing the two places of human interaction with the world; our physical actions (the arm) and our thoughts (the head). These two modes of interaction can be bound and infused with Jewish spirituality, bringing G-d into the most mundane areas of our lives.

וּקְתַבְתֶּם עַל מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

The *mezuzah* is a handwritten scroll containing the first two paragraphs of the Shema which we enclose in a case and put on our doorposts. Many sages wrote about the meaning behind this commandment and often spoke about the Divine protection that a *mezuzah* gives a home. One explanation for this commandment is that when we go from one room to the next, we are usually finishing one task and going to do something else. Our whole life could be viewed as a series of actions as we rush from one job to another, ticking off our ‘to do’ list as we go. The mezuzah reminds us that even the most mundane chores can have a ‘spiritual’ element to them. We may think that we are just doing the laundry, or washing the dishes, but our homes are our sanctuary and keeping them running properly is essential for the well-being of our families.

The Shema

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.

Hear Israel! The L-rd is our G-d, The L-rd is One.

בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

Baruch sheim kavod malchutob l'olam va'ed.

Blessed be [the] Name of his glorious kingdom for all eternity.

וְאַהַבְתָּ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל לְבָבְךָ וּבְכָל נַפְשְׁךָ וּבְכָל מְאֹדְךָ:

V'ahavta eit Adonai Elohecha b'chol l'vavcha uv'chol nafshecha uv'chol m'odecha.

And you shall love the L-rd your G-d, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources.

וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם עַל לְבָבְךָ:

V'hayu had'varim ha'eileh asher anochi m'tzav'cha hayom al l'vavecha.

Let these matters which I command you today be upon your heart.

וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבְנֶיךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

V'shinantam l'banecha v'dabarta bam, b'shivtecha b'veitecha, u'valechtacha vaderech u'v'shochb'cha u'vkumecha.

Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you lie down and when you get up.

וְקָשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:

U'kshartam l'ot al yadecha, v'hayu l'totafot bein ainecha.

Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be tefillin between your eyes.

וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

Uchtavtam al mezuzot beitecha, uvisharecha.

And write them on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.



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| מַלְכוּתוֹ <i>malchutob</i> kingdom | כְּבוֹד <i>kavod</i> of his glorious | שֵׁם <i>sheim</i> be [the] Name | בָּרוּךְ <i>Baruch</i> Blessed | אֶחָד: <i>Echad.</i> is One. | יְדוּד <i>Adonai</i> The L-rd | אֱלֹהֵינוּ <i>Eloheinu</i> is our G-d | יְדוּד <i>Adonai</i> The L-rd | יִשְׂרָאֵל <i>Yisrael</i> Israel | שְׁמַע <i>Shema</i> Hear |
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| נַפְשֶׁךָ <i>nafshecha</i> your soul | וּבְכֹל <i>uv'chol</i> with all | לְבַבְךָ <i>l'vavcha</i> your heart, | בְּכֹל <i>b'chol</i> with all | אֱלֹהֶיךָ <i>Elohecha</i> your G-d, | אֵת יְדוּד <i>eit Adonai</i> the L-rd | וְאַהֲבָתָּ <i>V'ahavta</i> And you shall love | וְעַד: <i>va'ed.</i> And ever | לְעוֹלָם <i>l'olam</i> For ever |
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| עַל <i>al</i> upon | הַיּוֹם <i>hayom</i> today | מְצִוָּתְךָ <i>m'tzav'cha</i> command you | אֲנֹכִי <i>anochi</i> I | אֲשֶׁר <i>asher</i> which | הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה <i>had'varim ha'eileh</i> These matters | וְהָיוּ <i>V'hayu</i> Let them be | מֵאֲדָתְךָ: <i>m'odecha</i> your resources. | וּבְכֹל <i>uv'chol</i> and with all |
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| בַּדֶּרֶךְ <i>vaderech</i> on the way, | וּבְלַחְתְּךָ <i>u'valechtacha</i> while you walk | בְּבֵיתְךָ <i>b'veitecha,</i> in your home, | בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ <i>b'shivtecha</i> while you sit | בָּם <i>bam,</i> of them | וְדִבַּרְתָּ <i>v'dibarta</i> and speak | לְבָנֶיךָ <i>l'vanecha</i> to your children | וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם <i>V'shinantam</i> Teach them | לְבַבְךָ: <i>l'vavecha.</i> your heart. |
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| לְטֹטְפוֹת <i>l'totafot</i> tefillin | וְהָיוּ <i>v'hayu</i> and let them be | יָדְךָ <i>yadecha,</i> your arm | עַל <i>al</i> upon | לְאוֹת <i>l'ot</i> as a sign | וּקְשַׁרְתָּם <i>U'kshartam</i> Bind them | וּבְקוּמָתְךָ: <i>u'vkumecha.</i> and when you rise. | וּבְשׁוֹכְבְּךָ <i>u'v'shochb'cha</i> when you lie down |
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| וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: <i>u'vsharecha.</i> and your gates. | בֵּיתְךָ <i>beitecha,</i> your house | מְזוֹזוֹת <i>mezuzot</i> the doorposts of | עַל <i>al</i> on | וּכְתַבְתָּם <i>Uchtavtam</i> And write them | עֵינֶיךָ: <i>ainecha.</i> your eyes. | בֵּין <i>bein</i> between |
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