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The Meaning of the Shema

If you will obey My commandments that I command you today, to love... G-d with all your heart and all your soul, [then] I shall provide rain at its proper time... you shall eat and be satisfied... Beware lest your heart turns away and you stray... G-d will be angry with you... and you will be swiftly banished from the... Land that G-d has given you (11:13-17; second paragraph of the Shema)

Both the first, and the second paragraph of the Shema at the end of this Parasha have the following things in common:

- To love G-d
- To keep the Torah teachings in mind at all times
- To pass the Torah on to the next generation – from father to son
- The practices of *Tefillin* and *Mezuzot*

However, the two paragraphs of the Shema have their differences, which amongst others include:

(a) The first paragraph demands: 'Hear,

O Israel: G-d, our G-d, G-d is One!' (6:4) It does not occur in the second paragraph. It does not tell us to love G-d after hearing Him. It tells us to love G-d by keeping His commandments, and enjoying the security that He will guarantee for His people in the Holy Land.

(b) The second paragraph contains a covenantal relationship – reward and punishment – which does not appear in the first. There, the Torah commands us to love G-d unconditionally – without any promise of reward in this world or the next. What may be learnt from these differences?

There are many meanings given by our sages throughout the generations of those most famous words: 'Hear O Israel'. Here we will take the words very literally – namely that 'Israel shall hear G-d'. This is explained below.

Most healthy people are blessed with five senses – touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound. But there are many things we cannot do. For example, we cannot pick up musical notes beyond a certain pitch – ask any dog owner with a silent dog whistle. We cannot pick up radio waves, but radios can. Just because we cannot sense those waves does not mean that they are not there, but we continue to benefit from them even though our five senses combined cannot directly pick them up.

Sensing G-d is life's work. Some people – even in our generation – seem to be far more successful in perceiving Him than

Mazal Tov to
Jake & Helen Weichholtz
and family on the engagement
of their **granddaughter**

others. They have a deeply refined spiritual sensitivity. They perceive G-d in all they do and in all that happens to them, and prayer is a time of joy and privilege to communicate with Him. That is part of 'loving G-d' (4:5). Those people actually can fulfill 'Hear, O Israel: G-d, our G-d, G-d is One!' They do not need the reward and punishment section of the second paragraph, as they are too close to Him to be swayed by such considerations. They will fulfill His teachings 'even if it costs them their lives' (Rashi to 'all your glory' in 6:5).

Others are less well spiritually endowed, and they find 'getting to know G-d' a hard and arduous task. At some moments they see the Hand of G-d within their lives, but almost immediately it is forgotten, and months go by without any perceived flash of the Deity. These people cannot 'Hear'. But the Torah gives them another route – by observance of His commandments the Torah testifies they will come to love G-d – even if at present they cannot 'Hear'. In due course they will 'Hear' more subtly when they see the benefits of keeping His commandments, and thereby develop spiritual sensitivity.

Perhaps that is why a person's last words are 'Shema Yisrael' – when a person's soul is ascending to a higher plane, it will indeed 'Hear G-d'... ■

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