It is not your responsibility to finish the work [of perfecting the world], but you are not free to desist from it either.

Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 2:16

Source: Mishnah, Pirkei Avot 2:16

November 3rd The Shofar Shema Israel

The Shema of Deuteronomy 6: *Hear, O Israel: the Lord your God s one. Blessed is God's name; His glorious kingdom is for ever and ever! And you shall love The Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; teach them faithfully to your children, speak of them in your home and on your way, when you lie down and when you rise up. Bind them as a sign upon your hand; let them be a symbol before your eyes. Inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.*

A scroll of Law is discovered

In the 18th year of King Josiah of Judah (622 B.C.), an exciting discovery was made during temple renovation: 2 Kings 22:3-8. The high Priest Hilkiah unearthed a scroll that appeared to have been written by Moses. It was **the book of the law.** The king was greatly affected by what he read in his scroll, and it inspired him to begin a series of religious reforms that changed the face of the kingdom. Scholars believe that the recovered scrolls were the law code from the book of (D).

D's Concerns

Its principal concern is the divinely inaugurated covenant made at Horeb (Sinai) and its significance for life in Israel's community. In it, the Jewish people are reminded of the solemn pact made between Israel and Yahweh. For those who choose to live by the covenant, there will be life and blessings, and for those who do not, death and curses. This is indeed the shape of Israel's history.

D's Origins

The nucleus of the Deuteronomic Code goes back to well before Josiah and it preserves many ancient laws and customs from the days before the monarch. There is also material of a much later era. For the Jewish people of Josiah's day, the author was unquestionably Moses.

Josiah's wide ranging reformation of Judah's religious and national life is well documented **in 2 Kings. 22:3-23:25; 2 Chronicles 34:8-35:19**. To read this history is to gain an insight into the way Jewish faith was inseparable from daily living.

Epic Historical Narrative

Even more significant was the discovery of a wide-ranging narrative history of Israel and Judah. This narrative retold the history of Israel using D as its starting point and gauge. It recounts significant events in Israel's history judging them in the light of the code. This is important in our understanding of D. Daily life was judged by and shaped by the covenant made with God. It was the only way they could exist as God's Chosen people .

The Fall of Judah

Josiah was killed in battle unexpectedly, and the high hopes of his supporters came crashing down. Then when Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 and exiles were taken to Babylon, all seemed lost.

But it did not all go badly. Many saw the fall of Judah as the result of failure to faithfully follow the D code, something highlighted in the Bible's history books. The nation fell to the Babylonians because of the nation wandered away from God, because they were negligent in their responsibility to place God first, to have the will of God on their hearts so passionately that it shaped who they were.

The Shema Yisrael – Deut 6:4ff

The *Shema* is arguably the most important, life shaping prayer in the Hebrew Bible. It is an unambiguous declaration of the oneness of God which is why it is recited twice a day morning and evening. Jews often recite the prayer as their dying words as in hope they placed themselves into the hands of God. Jewish martyrs made it their final profession of faith before being put to death.

The ***Shema*** summons Jews to feel an all-consuming love of God, a love that is unreserved, all-demanding, always, in all places and in all circumstances. Nothing in life is excluded. Thoughts are to be focused, words are to be spoken, and deeds are to be done.

The opening line, ***Hear, O Israel***, does not simply mean to let sound waves enter your ears. Here, the

word ***Shema*** means to allow the words to sink in, provide understanding, and generate a response—it is all about action. Biblically, hearing and doing are the same thing. It is not about the words said.

The next instruction in the prayer is to ***love the Lord your God***. What we translate into English as "love" here is the Hebrew word ***ahavah***. *Ahavah* is not about the warm, fuzzy, emotional energy we feel when we like someone. Much like listening, biblical love is about action. You *ahavah* someone when you act in loyalty, compassion and faithfulness. For Israel, loving means faithful obedience to the terms of their covenant relationship with Yahweh. Those terms are the laws and commands that make up the body of the book of Deuteronomy.

Obedience to these laws is not about legalism or trying to earn God's favour—it is most profoundly about love and active listening. If an Israelite loves God, they can more easily listen and respond to his teachings and guidance. This is why the words "listen" and "love" are so tightly connected and repeated through the opening speeches of Deuteronomy.

This ***Shema*** prayer is about listening to and loving God. The prayer continues, *you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength*. In other words, the people are to love God with all their being, the totality of who they are and what they do. Their knowledge, their existence, everything they are is to radiate the love of God with action, obedience, and covenant faithfulness. The face of God and the voice of God should resound clearly in all the things occupying their daily lives.

It is indeed a beautiful prayer, but why did it become so important for the ancient Israelites and Jewish people? The words of this prayer take on an even deeper meaning when we look at the context of the ancient Israelites and see how countercultural it was for them to serve one God above all else.

The real dangers was/is polytheism

All of this makes perfect sense as we read further in Deuteronomy. The Israelites had found themselves living amid dynamic and attractive polytheistic cultures for generations. From their roots in Canaan, to the long years in Egypt, to their traveling through Canaanite territory in the wilderness, they have been surrounded by people worshiping many different gods and so they were presented with a myriad of alternative beliefs, practices, philosophies and compromises. The threat was that the world beyond Judaism was shaping their beliefs and the way they were living in the land rather than living in such a manner that God was able to shape the world around them.

Moses taught how loyalty, obedience, and love for their one true God is the only way to life and that the greatest threat to Israel's future was in dividing their allegiance between many gods. They were forbidden to be *like the other nations* and to incorporate the beliefs and customs of those nations into their God-given beliefs was to court destruction. Their history made them aware of that sad reality. **The *Shema*** was for that reason prayed daily reminding the people that Yahweh alone was their God. They needed Him and they depended on Him for a fullness of life.

The *Shema* and Jesus

Reciting **the *Shema*** was widely practiced in the time of Jesus which meant it was formative for him. Not surprisingly then, he drew upon it in his teachings. When he was asked which command in the Torah was the greatest, Jesus answered with the ***Shema*** making it not only a Jewish prayer commitment but incorporating it into the daily prayers of the early Christians as well.

It is a beautiful prayer; one God's people have been praying for millennia. They are simple words but have the capacity to reshape the course of an entire people. Praying the ***Shema*** can keep God's love and loyalty in the forefront of our minds and drive us toward obedience—not out of obligation or duty but out of love. Jesus' words in the Gospel of John echo the Shema… *the one who has my commands and keeps them, that's the one who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him, and I will reveal myself to him*.

Following Jesus is about love. And as we receive Jesus' love, we respond with gratitude, humility, and a commitment to honour and love him in return. And not just God, but all those who have been created in the image and likeness of God. Love generates more love, which results in faithfulness and obedience. These are truths that can transform us from the inside out, cementing within us a hope for the future.