

Shema

Listen and Obey

שְׁמַע

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" **Mark**

12:29-30

Our modern Western culture tends to focus on mental activity. "It's the thought that counts," we say. But biblical cultures were very action-oriented, and this is reflected even in the language. Many verbs that we consider mental activities (hearing, knowing, remembering, etc.) are broadened to include their physical outcomes as well. Understanding this is often a great help for Bible study.



An excellent example is the word *shema*, (pronounced "shmah"), that has a primary meaning of "hear" or "listen." Listening, in our culture, is considered a mental activity, and hearing just means that our ears

pick up sounds. But in the Bible, the word *shema* is widely used to describe hearing and also its outcomes: understanding, taking heed, being obedient, doing what is asked. Any mother who has shouted at her children, "Were

you listening?" when they ignored her request to clean up their rooms, understands that listening should result in action.

In fact, almost every place we see the word "obey" in English in the Bible, it has been translated from the word *shema*. To "hear" is to "obey"! Try reading "obey" when you see the word "hear" or "listen" in the Scriptures, and note how often the meaning is enriched.

The word *shema* is also the name of the prayer that Jesus said and other observant Jews have said every morning and evening up until this very day. It is the first word of the first line, "Hear (*Shema*), O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5, JPS). By saying this, a Jewish person was saying to himself, "Take heed! Listen and obey! Love God with all of your life!" It was a daily recommitment to following God and doing his will. Jesus also quoted this verse as the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29-30), and he began with the word that says we should *shema*.

Knowing the greater meaning of *shema* helps us understand why Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" He is calling us to put his words into action, not just listen. He wants us to be doers of the word, and not hearers only (James 1:22). Western thinking stresses the exercise of the intellect and tends to minimize the *doing* of the Word – some even viewing this as "dead works." But Hebrew thinking emphasizes that we have not truly taken what we have heard into our hearts until it transforms our lives as well.

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