

Key words

Shema

Nefesh

Pikuach nefesh

Yetzer hara

Yetzer hatov

Repentance

Tefillin

Mezuzah

Tzitzit

Tallit

Key concepts

Judaism's understanding of humanity, including how people were created for a special purpose, is expressed in the Genesis story of creation (Genesis 1:27). Humans have been given the ability to use their intellect to perceive what God wants them to do in the world and to live lives which are holy and moral. Life is a divine gift (nefesh), and the mitzvot cover a range of commandments concerning how to care for the body and, ultimately, the soul.

Pikuach nefesh is the principle that the saving, protecting and preservation of life is of the utmost importance, and such is its importance that if the life of a person is in danger, any mitzvot may be ignored in order to save them.

The impulses of both evil inclination (yetzer hara) and good inclination (yetzer hatov) are evident as part of the nature of humanity. Jews believe that each individual has been given free will, and as a result of this, they have a personal choice in which impulse to follow. There is also an opportunity for repentance for the person who transgresses.

The Shema is a prayer that Jews recite every morning and evening; it is the first prayer that children learn. Devout Jews hope that, if possible, they will be able to make a final confession on their deathbed before reciting the Shema.

The Shema is made up of three paragraphs. **Deuteronomy 6:4-9** begins with the declaration that there is only One God. It goes on to express the need for the commandments given by God, and that people are to be reminded of them by wearing tefillin and fixing mezuzot to the doorposts at home. **Deuteronomy 11:13-21** declares acceptance of the commandments as well as undertaking to carry them out as evidence of loyalty to God. **Numbers 15:37-41** speak about specific things that need to be done such as the wearing of tzitzit which are to be worn on the tallit during prayer.

The Shema contains many reminders of the responsibilities that Jews have in keeping their part of the covenant relationship with God. The use of tefillin, mezuzah, tzitzit and tallit all act as aids to faith and remembering.

Key quotes

'... human beings are at the apex of creation, because they alone are made in the image of God.' (Wright)

'So God created mankind in his own image.' (Genesis 1:27)

'Do not do anything that endangers your neighbour's life.' (Leviticus 19:16)

'That he shall live by them, and not that he shall die by them.'
(Babylonian Talmud)

'Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.'
(Deuteronomy 6:8)

'...and you shall wite them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.' (Deuteronomy 6:9)

'You will have these tassels ... so you will remember all the commands of the Lord.' (Numbers 15:39)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

Does the Shema contain the most important beliefs within Judaism?

The answer to this question could all depend upon what a Jew determines to be the most important beliefs within their religion. The Shema affirms the Jewish belief in One God, and it contains the essence of the covenant relationship upon which Jewish faith and beliefs are built. Furthermore, it contains reminders of how to follow the commandments on a daily basis. However, it is open to interpretation, and some Reform Jews, for example, would not wear the tzitzit as an aid to faith.

To what extent is the Shema precise enough to guide Jewish belief and practice?

It could be argued that the Shema is certainly precise in that it focuses on the essentials of Jewish belief. However, perhaps it is the Torah in its entirety that is the most important guide to Jewish belief and practice. It is possible that the Shema plays a more important role as a declaration of faith.