These questions—of God, Israel, and prayer—offer important material for any Jew to explore. At the same time, we do not expect every Global Day participant to feel the same about these ideas. Our challenge is to lead a truly pluralistic conversation, allowing participants to express their ideas—to respectfully challenge other participants—and to approach the text with nuanced perspectives. How can a facilitator manage this?

- By opening the text for conversation, rather than offering an authoritative interpretation.
- By allowing for different ideas to co-exist in the classroom, including different understandings about God or Israel or prayer.
- By encouraging all involved to keep an open mind and allow themselves to be challenged by the ideas in the room and on the page.
- By encouraging those in the room to learn from each other.

The facilitator will also benefit from:

- Asking questions of participants, opening up questions for conversation; after reading a text, asking participants for “reactions” and “questions.”
- Stepping back, and calling on participants, rather than continually offering ideas.
- Allowing silence, letting people sit with ideas, mulling over their thoughts.
- Ensuring that those in the room know each others’ names and use them, attributing ideas to those who first raise them.

Leading Global Day conversations asks for a balance between facilitation and teaching. That is, those leading these conversations “facilitate” when they make room for participants to speak their minds, ensuring that the conversation has order. Teaching is also necessary. Through the Global Day, we hope that participants develop a commitment to and interest in Jewish texts, understanding that such texts are relevant to us today. We hope that they see that Jewish text-based conversations can enrich community work, that any of us can access texts—that they are not so frightening—and that Jewish study links each of us to the Jewish people as a whole. Facilitators have the responsibility of conveying these ideas to participants, as well as the “Things to Think About in this Class” that are shared in each class Facilitator’s Guide.

Facilitators can convey these ideas in a variety of ways:

- Facilitators can begin conversations by asking; Has anyone studied texts like this before? What is it like? What are our associations with Jewish text study? What would it mean to study more? Facilitators can also close conversations in this way, helping participants to debrief the experience and to validate each others’ positive experiences or concerns.
- Particularly if the group has relatively little experience studying Jewish texts, the facilitator can say directly; Studying Jewish texts is not so scary! Facilitators should feel comfortable sharing their own experiences with study.
- If the group includes community agency leaders, or individuals who are leaders in their own synagogues, the facilitator might lead a conversation about how each person might introduce more text study into their different agencies.

Facilitators should keep in mind these educational goals, asking participants questions, challenging them in ways that will help them think about these ideas.
The Classes

To help participants see texts as relevant to their lives, and to delve into and help participants grapple with the Shema, classes address big questions related to the Shema, specifically:

1. **What is Shema as prayer?** What role does it play in our lives?
   - **Classes:**
     - Shema: An Introduction and Overview
     - Bedtime Shema: A conversation for parents & bedtime rituals
     - A conversation: Call for Shema
     - A conversation: Bedtime Shema
     - Advance Class: The Shema’s Place in Jewish Liturgy

2. **What is the nature of God?** What does it mean to pray to the one God?
   - **Classes:**
     - Our Ideas about God
     - The Challenge of Idolatry
     - Monotheism and Oneness

3. **What is “Shema”?** What does it mean to listen, hear, or witness?
   - **Classes:**
     - Shema Yisrael: What Are We Witnessing?
     - Hear Israel: How Do We Hear the Shema?

4. **What does Israel mean as a Jewish home and how does God relate to the people of Israel?**
   - **Classes:**
     - Israel and Jewish Home
     - God and the People of Israel

Each class reviews primary ideas in the different areas, and each class also touches on several of the questions and the classes complement each other.

This year we have developed two types of classes—traditional classes with text to help lead discussion and conversations. Classes labeled conversations are articles for participants to read, discuss and reflect without additional text. The conversations that we presented here can be very good additions onto any class or can be used separately.

We have chosen texts that would challenge participants, raising issues core to the questions at hand, helping us to understand the Shema more richly, in ways that were relevant to the rabbis and will be relevant to us today. Each class includes Talmud, texts by Rabbi Steinsaltz, *midrashic*, biblical, and from medieval commentators, that shed light on the area under study.

**Classes follow a similar format:**

- Participants have a short introduction to the class, with texts and conversation questions
- Facilitators’ guides begin with a longer introduction to the class
- Facilitators have information to help them frame and structure the class, including “Things To Think About in this Class,” which are central understandings and questions to return participants to throughout the class. *These points are the fundamental points that we mean participants to learn or consider as a result of their study.*
- A breakdown of the class is provided to facilitators—we suggest class outlines for 30 minute conversations, 60 minute conversations, or 120 minute or two-lesson conversations.
- Each facilitators’ guide then suggests a way to begin the conversation, introductory questions, and then provides background information on each text.
- The facilitators’ guides conclude with suggested closing questions.
As you put together your outline for the conversation that you will lead, keep in mind:

- You don’t need to feel compelled to use each text and each activity. Use what makes sense and feels natural to you.
- Connect one text to the other. Often, the hardest part of these conversations is making the links between texts. Before sitting down to lead the conversation, create a mental outline of how one text leads to the next and of the points you are trying to make in teaching/leading.
- Feel free to share some of your own ideas and personal stories. Bringing yourself to the conversation helps participants see you as a genuine role model.
- Don’t be afraid to share your own questions about the texts. By sharing our questions, we assure students that one can live a rich Jewish life even with the questions.

These texts have been chosen for their relevance to human experience, but in the end, the true purpose of the day is to give each student a familiarity with and an appreciation for the study of Jewish texts and of the Shema, its role in Jewish tradition, and its role in our lives.

The packet is designed to be used in a variety of formats from which you are free to choose. All of the proposed formats can be easily applied to the material without any adaptation. Classes can vary in length, but we assume that they will be approximately an hour. Each text is rich with nuance, and a serious reckoning with the text will certainly yield new perspectives and meaning.

Beyond a text-by-text 60-minute discussion, here are some alternative formats you might consider:

- Have the students prepare together in pairs, by discussing the texts with the provided questions. Give them 20 to 30 minutes to prepare the sources and then bring them back together to share their insights. Monitor their progress so you know how many sources they have covered. Often you will find that they say they didn’t have enough time (this is a good thing!).
- Divide the class into small groups and assign a source or two to each group. For each question provided on the worksheet, ask them to come up with a matching question to share with the group when they get together. Give each group 10 to 15 minutes to work together and then reconvene the entire class and ask each group to share their insights.
- Divide the class into small groups and have the entire class learn one or two sources (depending on the length) for 5 to 7 minutes. Then bring them back for a debriefing that will also be 5 minutes at most. Do that for all the sources, leaving time for a 5- to 7-minute summary at the end.

We hope you will consider other creative presentations using different media when you see that these approaches will be beneficial to understanding the text and finding it meaningful. The hope is that both these goals will be realized and that the Talmud and Jewish texts will have gained hundreds of students as a result of this great day.

**A Final Word**

One of the few things that still unifies the Jewish people is the study of Torah. Even though there is disagreement regarding the Torah and the Talmud’s authority, its centrality is undeniable. For this alone, this is a day for all Jews to celebrate and cherish.

Thank you to Rabbi Benjamin Berger, Sarah Gershman, Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, Aliza Sperling, Rabbi Avi Weinstein, and Dena Weiss for contributing pieces to this curriculum.
The Global Day classes are intended for those relatively new to Jewish text study, but who have a basic understanding of one of the following: the Torah, Mishnah, or Talmud, and who have studied Jewish texts at least a few times before.

If you have an audience that is primarily new to Jewish text study, or an audience that approaches texts from a unique lifestage, we recommend using the class resources in these ways:

### Beginning Adult Learners

- Base a class on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s essay, “What Is Talmud Torah?”. You might want to split the paragraphs up among participants—give a few paragraphs to each 2 participants. After they read and parse the paragraphs, go around the room and create a summary of the essay from the participants’ feedback.
- Use the following discussion questions.
  - What is unique about the Talmud, according to Rabbi Steinsaltz?
  - How does the Talmud work?
  - Why are the Torah and Talmud central to Jewish tradition? What do you learn from this essay?
  - What is interesting or challenging to participants about text study?
- Look at a few texts about the Shema, so as to engage in the Global Day theme and to practice some of what you just learned about Talmud study. We recommend the following.
  - Ketubot 110b is a relatively straightforward text about an issue relevant for our idea: aliyah to Israel. It can be found within the class “Israel and Jewish Home.”
  - In the class “Israel and the Jewish Home” there is a Tosaphot commentary on this Talmud text. Participants can look at this, aiming to study the text and understand how commentators built on previous texts.
- Close by asking participants about their experience of text study, debriefing and helping participants look forward to studying again.

### High School Students

- Base a class on Rabbi Steinsaltz’s essay, “A Call for Shema.” Discussion questions follow the essay.
- Combine the conversation and the class on “The Nature of God” and “Our Ideas about God.” Focus on participants’ understandings of God, giving teenagers the opportunity to talk about what they pray to when they pray. Look particularly at Berachot 7a (in the class “The Lord is My God: Exploring our Ideas about God”), which will direct participants’ attention to how they imagine God and what God is. You might also want to incorporate the ideas from Rabbi Steinsaltz that are included in these classes.
- Take high school students through “Bedtime Shema,” and ask participants to share their responses to several texts, particularly HaMapil and Ribono Shel Olam. Focus them on what it means to review the good and bad of one’s day and to consider daily what they need be forgiven for and their own capacity to forgive.
**College Students**

Use “Bedtime Shema,” as it stands, or combine the classes on “The Nature of God” and “Our Ideas about God.” Each of these will engage college students at the intersection of their ideas about their lives and Jewish historic ideas and concepts.

At the close of the conversation, you might want to debrief the experience of studying texts together. What is it like? What are our associations with Jewish text study? What would it mean to study more? What do Jewish texts bring to our lives? What are our big questions about Judaism—how might we explore these through texts?
The Shema is undoubtedly the uncontested statement of faith for the Jewish people’s relationship with God. Yet most people say it so reflexively that it is often more a rote recitation than a profound statement of faith. The simple sentence belies the profundity that these words declare.

This class is designed as an overview and introduction to the Shema as a totality. The Shema will be depicted not only as a statement, but also as an experience. Both ancient and modern commentaries are offered side by side in an attempt to offer a deeper understanding of this prayer.

For the Facilitator

Specifically, the class was designed to focus on the following things to think about. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

Concepts to Think About in this Class

- **Question:** How have the great scholars of Jewish life and tradition understood the Shema?
- **Question:** Why do we say the Shema? What are we meant to be expressing in that moment?
- **Question:** What do I mean when I say the Shema?

Because this class is meant to be an introduction, every effort should be made to do the class in its entirety. It is designed to be sixty minutes.

THE FIRST MINUTES of the class should create a personal context for studying the sources. What Shema experiences do participants have that evoke profound childhood memories? Have participants ever thought about these words that we say, and if so, what does the Shema mean to participants?

A BIBLICAL INTRODUCTION AND COMMENTARY ON THE ONENESS OF GOD (15 MINUTES)

- Shema
- Zechariah
- Rashi
- Michael Wyschogrod
- Saadia Gaon
- Norman Lamm

WHO IS COMMANDED TO LISTEN? TARGET POPULATION: ISRAEL (20 MINUTES)

- Maimonides
- Soloveitchik
- Norman Lamm
- Fulfilling the Mission and summary (20 minutes)
- Heschel
- Conclusion
The Shema, this Biblical declaration, is nothing less than the defining statement of God’s relationship to Israel. Of all the verses in the Torah, this is the one the sages have chosen to be the definition of who God is and the nature of our relationship to Him. It has been universally accepted by all denominations of believing Jews, and the Shema’s authority and power has remained undiminished and unchallenged.

Legend tells that after the Holocaust, Rabbi Yosef Kahaneman zt”l, the Ponevezhe Rov (others say Rabbi Eliezer Silver tz”l) began looking for Jewish children who had survived the war. It was known that some of the children had ended up in churches and were being raised as Christians. The Rabbi encountered one church that denied the presence of Jewish children within their midst. He was granted permission to enter the children’s quarters to inspect for himself, and when he entered he began calling out “Shema Yisrael!” Instinctively, many of the children raised their hands to cover their eyes and started calling out, “mama! mama!”

Today, the group will take some time to think about what we actually mean when we cover our eyes and declare these timeless words. To begin the conversation, the facilitator might help participants explore the Shema through any of these questions:

- Why is oneness a defining characteristic?
- What is the significance of declaring the Lord as our God?
- Why is Israel solely mandated to heed this statement?
- Why is God given a name, even if it is ineffable?
- Finally, how does Israel fulfill the unification of God’s Name, and why is that so critical to the mission of Israel?

Write the words of the Shema on the board and read them together:

Deuteronomy 6:4
Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One. Blessed is the Name of His glorious kingdom for all eternity.

- What do these words mean to participants?
- What questions do participants have about these words?

Text #1: Zecharia 14:9

The Prophet Zecharia summarizes the Shema and its meaning by declaring that the proof of Messianic times is when this awareness of Oneness will be pervasive among all people.

And the Lord will be King over all the earth,
On that day the Lord will be One and His name will be One.

1. What implications do these words have for how we understand the Shema?
2. Zecharia was not talking about his present-day; he is projecting (“one day”). What does this infer about the nature of prayer to God during Zecharia’s times? What kind of time is he projecting?
Text #2: Rashi—Deuteronomy 6:4

The Medieval commentator Rashi, when commenting on the Shema, explains why the Lord is our God for now and will ultimately be the God of everyone. Rashi indicates a process that promotes the Oneness of God throughout the world, and as something that has been a Jewish legacy from the time of Jacob.

God our God, God is One—God who is “our God” now but not the God of the other nations, God is destined to be the “One God,” as it says, “For then I shall change the nations to speak a clear language so that they may all call out in the Name of God; on that day God will be One and God’s name will be One.”

1. How is this comment similar to that of Zecharia?
2. How does this idea help to explain why the Shema is so central to Jewish life?
3. How else does this text shed light on the Shema?

Text #3: Abraham’s Promise, Michael Wyschograd (Page 40)

Professor and theologian Michael Wyschograd understands the Shema as a mission statement for Israel: We are personalizing what is in danger of being an abstraction. In his understanding, it is the Shema that warns against this temptation, and requires us to name the One as One, as an intimate inscrutable on the one hand, and as beloved on the other.

The task of Israel is to proclaim that only The Lord [the Lord] is God. The Lord is thus identified by a proper name not by the noun God. “Only The Lord is God” asserts that the one specific person described in the Bible is God. And the specificity of The Lord can only be expressed through the stories recorded in the Bible.

He is the God who created heaven and earth, chose Abraham, brought the children of Israel out of Egypt. This is the reason that the history of the Jewish people plays such an essential role in the definition of The Lord while, in one sense, “creator of heaven and earth” alone defines Him uniquely, in the broader sense only a relatively adequate recounting of His deeds determines that we are speaking about the particular The Lord who is the only God. Without such a recounting, we are likely to be referring to God as an abstract noun rather than to God who does not hesitate to assume a proper name. When a proper name of God recedes into the background, we move into the realm of first causes and unmoved movers, the God of pure reason rather than the covenant partner of Israel.

1. Why does it mean to adopt the Shema as a mission statement?
2. Why say the Shema and make this declaration, according to Wyschograd?
Text #4: Saadiah Gaon—Commentary on the Torah

Saadiah Gaon was an early medieval Rabbi and theologian. His book Beliefs and Opinions was a popular and influential work in Jewish thought. His understanding of the word Shema, which literally means “hear” or “listen up,” is both pithy and profound.

Shema: Know
Shema: Accept

1. What is the difference between knowing, and accepting?
2. Why might knowing come first?
3. What does this understanding of the Shema add to our understanding of the Shema?

Text #5: The Shema, Rabbi Norman Lamm (Page 16)

Rabbi Norman Lamm has written a book on the Shema, and he also ponders Saadia Gaon’s comment on the Shema. How did your understanding dovetail with what Rabbi Lamm has written?

Saadia’s second sense of this word is kabbel, “accept,” implying faith, commitment, and obedience, as in the Talmudic expression for the Shema, kabbal’ol malkhut shamayim, the acceptance of the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven. The recitation is not to be a disembodied intellectual declaration, a mere academic exercise, but must represent a profound spiritual, existential commitment to the content and implications of this first verse of the Shema. That is, we are summoned not only to listen but to listen to.

1. Summarize what Rabbi Lamm says here. What does it add to how we understand the Shema?
2. What is the difference between “listen” and “listen to”?
3. How do we act if we “listen to”?

Text #6: Maimonides, Laws of Kriat Shema 1:4

If God is the Lord of all peoples, then why is Israel singled out? This special relationship is a defining motif of Jews and their relationship not only to God, but to the world and to each other. The Rambam (Maimonides) in his monumental Code of Jewish Law, gives the following explanation. Following this source, the great 20th century Jewish sage and scholar, Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik offers an explanation of the significance of Rambam’s elucidation of an ancient Jewish tradition from the Midrash. The sages understand that Jacob lived long before Moses; they are suggesting that when the verse said, Shema Yisrael, it was referring to Yisrael, the Patriarch, and not to the people of Israel. Moses is recounting an event not previously recorded in the Torah, but something that already happened, and is only being revealed to us now.
Shema: An Introduction and Overview

When reading K'riat Shema, after finishing the first verse, one quietly says: “Barukh Shem K’vod Malkhuto L’olam Va’ed” (Blessed is the Name of the Glory of His Kingdom forever), after which he resumes reading in his usual fashion “V’Ahavta et Adonai Elohecha” (You shall love the Lord your God) until the end.

Why do we read this? We have a tradition that at the time that Jacob, our forefather, assembled his sons in Egypt at the time of his death, he commanded and exhorted them regarding the unity of God and the way of God which Abraham and Isaac, Jacob’s grandfather and father, followed. Jacob asked them and said to them: “My sons, is it possible that there is among you someone unfit who does not share my belief in the unity of God?”, as Moses Rabbenu said: “It may be that there is among you a man or woman...” (Deuteronomy 29:17). They all responded and said: “Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad” (Hear Yisra’el! The Lord is our God, The Lord is One) in other words: “Hear from us, our father, Yisra’el, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” The elder responded and said: “Barukh Shem K’vod Malkhuto L’olam Va’ed”. Therefore, all Jews have the custom to say the praise with which the elder Yisra’el praised, after this verse.

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. How does this text explain the importance of the Shema, or the role that it plays?

Text #7: Worship of the Heart, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (Page 110)

The following commentaries from the twentieth century giant Rabbi Soloveitchik plumb the significance of what the Rambam is saying when he quotes this tradition. What would be the purpose for tracing the Shema back to the Patriarch Jacob/Israel? What is gained?

What message does this narrative convey to us? First, that the creed of Shema goes back to the very origin of our history, to the dawn of our collective existence. The solemn declaration is perhaps the first truth, which our great Patriarchs discovered. It became their motto and dominant motif in life. It is not merely a theoretical truth, a philosophical pronouncement, a religious dogma, a norm, however central and endowed with meaning. It is rather the shibboleth of our historical uniqueness, a living doctrine which bears witness to course of ages, uniting us with our Patriarchs, drawing them into our temporal ontic circle, thus lending to our own existence the tenor of “timelessness.”... It is indeed the acceptance of a great task, the declaration addressed to the remote past that joins the march of generations committed to one idea. In a word, the reading of Shema is a dialogue between the ages, the continual restaging of the historic meeting of Jacob and his sons, pregnant with paradoxical destiny, full of import.

Text #8: The Shema, Norman Lamm (Page 21)

According to this midrash, our words, repeated twice daily, are addressed not to the general community, k’lal Yisrael, but to our very personal intimate forefather Jacob-Israel. In calling out to him across the chasm of the generations, we assure him and ourselves that the One God he worshiped is ours as well; that we continue his tradition, which he entrusted to his children, that we have not and will not falter as we strive to implement the “Kingdom of Heaven” in our own times and our own places.

1. How do Rabbis Soloveitchik and Lamm understand the comments from Maimonides?
2. How do these comments resonate with you?
Text #9: God in Search of Man, Abraham Joshua Heschel (Page 281)

Continuing the theme of a personal God, Rabbi Heschel explains the psychology and the emotional content of intimacy with the unknowable. The idea that singing to God precedes and even accommodates understanding is an interesting idea. Do we have to understand before we love, or does our love enhance understanding?

If God were a theory, the study of theology would be the way to understand Him. But God is alive and in need of love and worship. This is why thinking of God is related to our worship. In an analogy of artistic understanding, we sing to Him before we are able to understand Him. We have to love in order to know. Unless we learn how to sing, unless we know how to love, we will never learn how to understand Him.

1. Summarize the text. What is Rabbi Heschel trying to communicate? Why, do you think?
2. How does the Shema express these ideas?
3. How do Rabbi Heschel's ideas build on what we have already looked at?

Concluding Thoughts

This class has taken students through a number of texts. What have participants learned? Summarize with participants. How do they see the Shema differently now?

Immediately after the Shema comes the following declaration. In light of all we have learned, how do you connect the Shema with what follows immediately after? What will be in their minds and hearts now when they say the Shema?

Deuteronomy 6:5-9

You shall love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your resources. Let these matters that I command you today be upon your heart. Teach them thoroughly to your children and speak of them while you sit in your home, while you walk on the way, when you retire and when you arise. Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be tefillin between your eyes. And write them on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.
Our sages compiled a “bedtime themed” liturgy known as the Bedtime Shema. The liturgy is meant to acknowledge our fear at going to sleep and hope that we return to our bodies. When parents say the Shema with children, the moment becomes one of transmission of Jewish commitment and commitment to prayer. In this class, we explore how the Shema can be a meaningful prayer experience for adults and for families.

During the rabbis’ time, it was thought that when we slept, we gave our souls to God, and we were never sure if our souls would be returned to us and we would be alive the next morning. Bedtime was filled with fear. The bedtime liturgy was created to guard our lives and souls, to assure ourselves as we went to sleep. It has become an opportunity for individuals to have time to themselves, for reflection, concentration, and devotion. It has also become a treasured and influential Jewish moment for parents and children: In it, we connect to Jewish tradition and to the Jewish people, we create a sacred moment of family, and we express our fear and affirm that we are safe before we turn to night-time darkness.

Here we explore some of the texts of the Bedtime Shema and also consider the nature of bedtime rituals, thinking about what it means to build Jewish moments and moments of reflection through bedtime rituals for ourselves and with our children.

For the facilitator:

This conversation was designed to help participants gain a richer understanding of the Bedtime Shema as a window into the Jewish experience of bedtime. Through a combination of text study, brainstorming, and creative discussion, we hope participants will come away with a greater knowledge of existing Jewish bedtime prayers rituals and also the tools to create new rituals. The texts in this conversation are designed to spark conversation.

This conversation can be facilitated with several audiences in mind:

- Parents, and particularly parents of young children or those about to be parents
- Those interested in considering how we use ritual to pass on our tradition to the next generation
- Those interested in discussing how we create our own moments of meaningful prayer

Specifically, the class was designed to focus on the concepts above. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.
Things to Think About in this Class

- Ritual, doing the same thing repeatedly, and particularly Jewish ritual, can connect us to our people, to our past, to God, and to each other, creating a moment embedded in who we are as the ritual becomes a part of us.
- The rabbis understood bedtime as a tremendous time of vulnerability, as we literally put our life in God’s hands. Today, as we open our minds and hearts to our dreams and nightmares, the Shema can still play a role of prayer and comfort.
- **Question:** How do we want to contextualize our own bedtimes? What can the Shema and related liturgy mean for us at bedtime?

This conversation can be shorter or longer, held for one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Begin the conversation by asking about bedtime rituals
- Look at texts 4 and 5, *HaMapil* and *Ribbono Shel Olam*
- Close the conversation by asking about how these ideas might reframe bedtime for participants

**1 LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Begin the conversation by asking about bedtime rituals
- Look at texts 4 and 5, *HaMapil* and *Ribbono Shel Olam*
- Close the conversation by asking about how these ideas might reframe bedtime for participants

**ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)**
- Begin the conversation by asking about bedtime rituals
- Review the first set of short texts, from Rabbi Steinsaltz, from the Talmud, and *V’Ahavta*
- **Break**
- Look at texts 4 and 5, *HaMapil* and *Ribbono Shel Olam*
- Look at the final text from the *Shulchan Aruch*
- Close with the provided questions and conversation topics

**Introductory questions**

The facilitator might begin the conversation with a simple introduction:

- Ask participants to brainstorm words that they associate with bedtime
- Ask participants what bedtime rituals they remember from their childhoods or how they create bedtime rituals with their children now
- Discuss how they experience the Shema today and what their own bedtime rituals are like now (for themselves or with their partners or families)
Text #1: Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz: A Guide to Jewish Prayer

Begin the conversation with this segment from Rabbi Steinsaltz’s essay on the Bedtime Shema, which outlines the origin of this bedtime prayer. The paragraph covers a number of reasons for saying the Shema, from historic reasons that might seem outdated to those that might still seem highly relevant. The section can be used to ground participants in the purpose of the Bedtime Shema and also in the nature of bedtime, allowing a conversation about how participants feel about bedtime and about how they put their children (if applicable) to sleep.

The recitation of Shema at bedtime is one of the five fixed daily orders of prayer; yet, far from being a communal form of prayer, it is a highly personal one, meant for the individual while alone with himself. The origin of reading the Shema at bedtime... is in the Talmud, which states that it was instituted mainly for purposes of safety and defense. In the literal sense, it is supposed to guard a person from all kinds of danger that might come upon one during the night, when asleep and defenseless. But in a deeper sense, it is intended to guard the soul from all kinds of spiritual harm that might occur while one is lying in bed.

1. Summarize the text. What are the different reasons that the Bedtime Shema was developed?
2. Which reasons resonate with you?
3. What is the difference, for you, between saying the Shema with a community and saying the Shema individually? What is it like to say the Shema individually?
4. What is bedtime like for children that you know, or for your children? How do you comfort them? How do you comfort yourself?

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 57b

This text demonstrates the Talmudic idea that sleep was a “mini-death”—and, the text provides more than that. It suggests that sleep is both threat and opportunity, that sleep is a threat (like death) and dreams are an opportunity (like prophesy), and that bedtime represents both of these things. We study the Bedtime Shema in this context.

Fire is one sixtieth of purgatory, honey is one sixtieth of manna, Shabbat is one sixtieth of the World to Come, sleep is one sixtieth of death, a dream is one sixtieth of prophesy.

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What is the relationship between each of these things (Shabbat and the World to Come, sleep and death, dream and prophesy)?
3. How does this contextualize our conversation about the Bedtime Shema?
This short Talmudic text is the source for requiring one to say Shema right before bedtime. The way this was later understood was that the Shema should be the last thing one should say before going to sleep. But no reasons are given here. What do participants think the reasoning was?

The text refers to the idea that, fulfilling the commandment to say these words twice daily, the Shema is already said in the morning and evening liturgies. There is no Biblical commandment to say the Shema at bedtime.

Even though one has already said Shema in synagogue, it is a mitzvah to say it before bedtime.

1. No reason is given for this practice. What might be the thinking behind saying this additional Shema?
2. What does it mean that the Shema is already said in synagogue? Why is this important?

Text #4: V’Ahavta/ Deuteronomy 6

Read and discuss briefly as a group as a way to introduce the idea of saying the Shema at bedtime.

And you shall love God, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with everything that you have. May you take to heart these things that I command of you today. Teach them to your children. Speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on your way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. Put them as a sign on your arm and as tefillin between your eyes. Write them on the doorposts of your house and gates.

1. Summarize this familiar text. What are the different things it is trying to communicate?
2. Why might we say the Shema before we go to bed?
3. What does “when you lie down” mean? What are all of the things it could mean?
4. To what extent is this text about intergenerational Jewish life? How do we, as Jews, teach our tradition to the next generation?
I forgive anyone who made me angry or upset or who hurt me,
My body, my things, my feelings, or anything thing that is mine
By accident or on purpose
By words, actions, thoughts;
In this world or in another world.
I forgive each one.
May nobody be punished because of me.
May it be your will God—God of my ancestors—that I not hurt anyone anymore.
Whatever hurt that I have done, may You forgive me and not punish me.
God, may these words I say and the feelings in my heart make You happy.

1. What resonates with you from this text?
2. What does this text reveal about the Jewish understanding of bedtime?
3. Why might it be important for adults or children to have an opportunity to forgive and ask forgiveness before they go to sleep?
4. How can we incorporate the themes from this text into our own bedtime rituals?
Text #6: Hamapil

This text, a meditation about sleep that is based on a Talmudic passage from Berachot 60b, focuses on sleep and dreams as a gateway to a different world. Sleep always allows for the possibility of not waking up, or for a bad dream potentially disrupting our days. What does it mean to study this text in that context? How applicable is it today?

This may be a good time to ask participants to break up into hevruta—pairs in order to look closely at the text. Ask the pairs to read through the text together and discuss the questions that follow. Then come back together and ask the participants to share something they discussed with their hevruta.

Blessed are you God, our God, Ruler of the world who makes my eyes heavy and my eyelids sleepy. May it be your will God—God of my ancestors that I lie down to sleep in peace and awake in peace. May I not be upset by any bad dreams or thoughts. May my children someday make you happy. May you help me see in the dark, for it is you who illuminates the pupil of the eye. Blessed are you God, who lights up the whole world with your Glory.

1. What does and doesn’t resonate with you about this text?
2. What does this text reveal about the Jewish understanding of bedtime?
3. Why do you think this text comes right after the preceding one about forgiveness?
4. What is the connection between this meditation and the Shema?
5. Why do you think we were commanded that these words be the last ones we say before sleep? Why is that important?
Text #7: Shulchan Arukh, Rabbi Moshe Isserles Orach Chaim 239:1

The Shulchan Arukh, literally “the set table,” is an authoritative code of Jewish Law that dictated the parameters of how one should say this prayer. From these rules, we can see what the rabbinic intent was for this prayer, and how that may or may not correspond with our own sensibilities. The Shema was, literally, to be what we said just before bedtime, its words on our lips as we fall asleep. Why? Moreover, it was set as a spiritual discipline, where when done routinely it might have an impact on consciousness. What do you envision that impact might be?

One should not eat or drink, or speak after one says the Bedtime Shema, rather he should fall asleep immediately, as it is written: “Ponder it on your bed, and be still…” (Psalms 4:5)...and if he reads the Shema and could not fall asleep immediately, he should read it over and over again until he sinks in sleep, so that the reading of Shema will immediately precede his going to sleep.

1. Why might these rules have been established for saying the Shema at bedtime?
2. What might be an outcome of adopting this as a regular process?
3. Is there anything that might stop this from being a rote practice that ceases to have meaning?

CLOSING EXERCISES

In closing, the facilitator first might want to summarize the role that the Bedtime Shema liturgy plays in Jewish life. What are the guidelines for saying the Shema at bedtime?

The facilitator might want to raise any one of the following questions with participants. Rabbi Steinsaltz’s essay on the Bedtime Shema (enclosed in the curriculum guide, some of which begins this class) provides some texture for exploration of these questions:

- What does it mean to engage in a consistent ritual, every night? What does it add to our evenings?
- Why would we say the Shema at night? What do these pieces add to our evenings? What might they add to our relationships with our children, with Judaism, or with God?
- What kind of self-accounting happens at the end of the day, before bedtime and through these texts?

The facilitator might also ask that participants meet in pairs to talk about what bedtime rituals they might create for themselves or alongside their own children. These rituals might be based on the Bedtime Shema or might accompany the Bedtime Shema. The conversation might close with sharing of these rituals and a discussion of why they resonate with participants.
In addition to being a phrase of affirmation and comfort, the Shema is a central part of Jewish liturgy. What role does it play in the liturgy? What is the intention behind our recitation of the Shema in its liturgical context?

In its simplicity, the Shema has functioned throughout Jewish history as a declaration of faith and a source of comfort. As Jews were persecuted and murdered for their beliefs, they followed in suite of the Mishnaic sage Rabbi Akiva, proclaiming the Shema, sometimes with their last breaths.

Even with this practice, so as to fulfill the commandment of reciting its words twice daily, the rabbis dictated that the Shema would be said as a central part of prayer services, surrounded by other prayers relating to love of God, faith, and God’s redemption of the Jewish people from Egypt. At the same time, with this full set of blessings and liturgical writings, the Shema is not technically considered a prayer. Reciting the Shema is its own mitzvah and recitation of the Shema and its blessings is prescribed in conjunction with prayer, specifically the Amidah, or “Silent Devotion.”

The Shema is nevertheless considered a prerequisite to having the temerity to pray and ask God for daily sustenance. Without acknowledging our obedience to God and His kingdom, how dare we venture further into the realm of praise, petition and gratitude?

This collection of sources explores the nature of the full Shema in this context, the juxtaposition of reciting the Shema and its blessings and praying the Amidah. It uses this context to drill down on specific questions about the Shema: If the Shema is not a prayer, how does it function in a prayer setting? Why do so many people think of it as a prayer? What does this mean for our recitation of the Shema?

The legal term for the juxtaposition of the Shema and the Amidah is semichat geulah l’tefilah (juxtaposing Redemption and Prayer). The term redemption is borrowed from ga’al yisrael (Redeemer of Israel) which is the concluding blessing of the Shema and its liturgical sequence, added so that in addition to saying the words of the Shema daily, those praying would also recall daily God’s redemption of the people Israel from Egypt. Familiarity with this term will help participants understand and articulate not only how the Rabbis explain the Shema’s presence in a context of prayer, but also how the participants themselves think about what the Shema does when one says it in a prayer context.

For the facilitator:

If the facilitator were to ask participants what they think prayer is, they would like get two answers: praise for God and petition of God. Yet, the Shema is not petition, and it is not a typical praise of God; there are few adjectives of grandeur in this liturgical piece. What, then, is the role of Shema?

These texts suggest that recitation of the Shema plays a crucial role in preparing those praying for both petition and praise and does something even more fundamental: It prepares those praying to approach God. Particularly the six words of the Shema itself allow us to get close to a metaphorical door between God and ourselves. They enable us to knock on that door, to let God know that we are ready and in turn to let ourselves know that we are ready for meaningful prayer recitation. We have an existing relationship with God, but we need and let God know that we are ready to exercise that relationship; we need to make the relationship explicit.
To look at the Shema as preparing us for prayer, the texts here focus almost entirely on the relationship between the Shema and the Amidah and between the Shema and redemption, looking at one Gemara and then commentaries on that Gemara. The class begins by noting the relationship between the Shema, V'Ahavta, and the succeeding paragraph(s), demonstrating some of the reasoning behind the series of blessings and liturgical pieces that eventually became the Shema in its entirety.

Remember that the beginning of the liturgy of the Maariv or Shacharit service (not referring to Pesukei D'Zimra, for example) is referred to as the “Shema and its blessings.” The Shema, in fact, begins with the Bar’chu, the call to worship, and then ends paragraphs later, with the Shema and then paragraphs from Deuteronomy and Numbers serving as the center of those texts. The Shema closes with a prayer for redemption, ga’al Yisrael, acknowledging God’s role in redeeming Israel. These paragraphs surrounding the six words of the Shema itself were added, primarily by the rabbis, in order to recall daily God’s redemption of God’s people Israel.

The mitzvah of reciting the Shema includes saying not only the six words of the Shema itself, but also the paragraphs that follow it. Thus, the Shema concludes with a prayer for redemption.

Specifically, the class was designed to focus on the following things to think about. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

◆ **Things to Think About in this Class**

- Prayer is not only about petition or praise; prayer is also about relationship, with God or even with Jewish tradition.
- Some prayers help us get ready for relationship. In its context, Shema is a way for us to channel our intensity and our relationship in preparation for prayer.
- Prayer is not ahistorical—prayers have a role in calling up the Jewish narrative.
- **Question:** What does Shema mean to me? Why do I say the Shema?
- **Question:** Do I have a special Shema story?

During the conversation, participants might raise questions about how they relate to the Shema even if they don’t relate to a transcendent God, or to a God that hears prayer. The facilitator might want to plan this conversation for the end of the class, asking how participants say the Shema in that context (i.e. How do I say the Shema when I don’t believe that God hears prayer? What does the Shema mean in that context?). Participants might raise ideas such as that the Shema connects them to parts of their tradition even without “belief,” and prepares them to think about their personal role in bringing about redemption. Or, they might discuss the state of mind that prayer brings them, a necessary quiet or centering in a hectic world. Can they gain wisdom from these texts, even if they don’t believe in the literal “truth” of the words? How do concepts within the text such as “readiness” or “purity” relate to them?
Introductory Conversation:

In this context, the facilitator might open the conversation with any one of a number of questions:

- What is “prayer”? What do we do when we pray?
- What is the role of prayer in our lives? What about the role of prayer between God and God’s people?
- What role does the Shema play?
- What do you think about when you say Shema? What role does it play in the liturgy for you?
- In what ways are the Shema and the Amidah connected? In what ways are they distinct? How do the Shema and Amidah support and illuminate one another? What is gained by bringing them together?

Text #1: Mishnah Berachot 2:2

Very succinctly, this first text teaches us why Shema and V’Ahavta precede the succeeding paragraphs of the Shema and its blessings (the paragraph after the V’Ahavta begins with, “and when you heed my commandments.” It is a roadmap of sorts for the kavanah, intention, we should have when saying these words. It launches this conversation by giving participants a sense of order within the prayers under discussion here.

Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Korcha said: Why does Shema precede the prayer that begins with “and when you heed my commandments”? In order that one should receive the yoke of heaven first, and afterward receive the yoke of the commandments.
1. The Mishnah articulates a two stage process. According to Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Korcha, what is the purpose of both these stages?

2. How does this fit with what you understand is the purpose of these prayers?

Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 4b

This straightforward text elevates the importance of linking Shema and Amidah, helping us to understand this link between the two: The Shema and redemption are linked in this way, in part, because the Shema plays such a crucial role in preparing those praying for their relationship with God and for meaningful prayer, making the request for redemption in ga’al Yisrael and then the Amidah more potent. By saying both together, Rabbi Yochanan suggests that we guarantee that our prayer will be received well, that we will have a place in the World to Come.

Particularly as you discuss the last question—why the Shema might introduce “prayer”—you might want to talk about how our proclaiming the unity of God well sets us up to be heard when we praise God’s redemptive capacity. The Shema, in other words, helps to emphasize prayers for redemption because of its emphasis on our faith in God.

Make sure that participants understand that “prayer” here refers to the Amidah, while the “blessing of redemption” refers to ga’al Yisrael. Show them where this is in the prayerbook if they are not sure.

As Rabbi Yochanan said: Who is a person destined for the World to Come? One who juxtaposes [the blessing of] redemption and the evening prayer.

1. Summarize the text. What is redemption here, and what is evening prayer?

2. How does Rabbi Yochanan express the importance of juxtaposing redemption and prayer?

3. What do you think would serve as a good introduction to a prayer for redemption? Would you choose the Shema? Why or why not?

Text #3: Rashi to Berachot 4b

This Rashi text comments on the Gemara above. It should expand our understanding of the relationship between Shema and redemption and of the role that Shema plays in prayer. It is Rashi who introduces the “knocking” metaphor, noting that knocking must be part of a process of drawing close to God and entering into the relationship through prayer only when ready. In other words, praise also plays a role, and don’t wait too long standing on the porch!

Note that Rashi adds the historical context of the Shema, that is, the reference to Egypt and God’s redemption of the Jewish people. Generally, this often happens in our liturgy: By including a few lines of Biblical text or by mentioning a Biblical event, our liturgy reminds us of emotions or interactions between God and the people that make the words that we are saying more complex.
... And we say in the Jerusalem Talmud Berachot: One who does not juxtapose redemption and prayer to what is he similar? To the beloved of the king that came and knocked on the door of the king. The king emerged and found that [the beloved] had departed so [the king] also departed. Rather a person should draw God close to him and charm God with the adulation and praise of [recounting] the departure from Egypt and he will draw close to God, and while God is still close a person should demand his needs.

1. What is the reason Rashi gives for this law (of linking the Shema, redemption and the Amidah)? What is the “knocking on the door of the king?”
2. How does Rashi characterize the Shema? What role does the Shema play?
3. What do you think of Rashi’s understanding of prayer? How does Rashi’s explanation affect your view of prayer?
4. Rashi adds the relevance of the added paragraphs after the Shema and notes the historical context that they add. What do you make of this? What role do the historical words play in the piece or in your recitation of the piece?

Text #4: Midrash Shemot Rabbah 22:3

This additional commentary on the Gemara that outlines the relationship between the Shema and redemption gives further meaning to the role that Shema plays as we begin to pray. Here, the midrash suggests that the Shema provides purification before prayer, as when the Israelites sang from their devotion and God came—similarly, we purify our hearts through the Shema, singing of our devotion, and then, when we ask for redemption, God will provide.

And why is it necessary to mention the splitting of the Red Sea in the concluding blessing of the Shema? Because it was when He parted the sea for them that they believed in Him, as it says, They believed in God and Moses his servant (Ex. 14:31). And in the merit of the belief that they believed they merited to sing (at the Song of the Sea) and the divine spirit descended on them. As it says after it, Then Moses sang (Ex. 15:1). Therefore a person is required to juxtapose Redemption and Prayer as they [placed] song after the belief and the splitting [of the sea]. And just as they purified their hearts and sang as it says, The people feared God and believed and afterward, Then [Moses] sang, so too a person must purify his heart before he prays. So too Job says, For there is no theft in my hands and my prayer is pure (Job 16:17). R’ Joshua bar Nehemiah the priest said—Is there really a dirty prayer? Rather, anyone whose hands are dirty with stealing will call out to God and He will not answer him. Why? For he is praying in sin. But Job whose work was clear of theft, his prayer was pure. Therefore he says, For there is no theft in my hands, i.e. that there is no wrong doing on my hands or in my work, my prayer is pure.

1. According to this midrash, why is it important to speak about the Exodus before entering into prayer?
2. How do you think the second discussion, about the prayer of a thief, might be connected to the beginning discussion about the Song of the Sea?
3. What does this mean for recitation of the Shema?
Text #5: Rabbeinu Yonah to Berachot 4b

This additional commentary to the original Gemara that we looked at suggests a very concrete reason for the link between the Shema and Redemption—that through the Shema, we do the service necessary to be redeemed, to enter the World to Come.

Is it really because he juxtaposes redemption and Prayer he deserves so great a reward as to enter the world to come?! And my teacher, the Rabbi, said that the reason he merits such a great reward is because the reason God redeemed us and took us out of Egypt was so that we would be His slaves, as it says, They are My servants that I have taken out of Egypt (Lev. 25:55). And in the blessing of Redemption it mentions this kindness that God has done for us, and the Prayer is the service, as we say, And you shall serve the Lord your God- that is prayer (Bava Batra 92b). And when he mentions the exodus from Egypt and then prays immediately he demonstrates that just as a slave who is acquired by a master has to do the commandments of his master so too he recognizes the good that God has done for him in redeeming him. [He acknowledges] that he is His slave and serves him because He has redeemed him, and does His will and commandments. The result is that because of [this service] he merits the world to come.

1. We often refer to prayer in the synagogue as “services.” How does Rabbeinu Yonah understand this service? How does it change your view of prayer?
2. According to Rabbeinu Yonah, what is it that really grants one entry to the World to Come?
3. Which of the earlier sources do you think is closest to the approach of Rabbeinu Yonah?
4. How does this inform our recitation of the Shema?

Concluding Conversation

In sum, these texts should provide an understanding of the Shema as readiness, and as specifically helping us to find power, meaning, relationship, and our voice before we ask for the ultimate gift: a place in the World to Come, redemption from an unredeemed world. Participants also might have been thinking about each individual prayer, and how, in addition to the Shema, every prayer plays an important and unique role in the liturgy. And they might have been thinking about the role of their own voice during the Shema, how while our voices are coming together collectively in praise, we each play our own role in prayer. They might draw a parallel between their figurative voices and the more literal substance of the text. While our voices in unison are what comprise the community, each person on an individual level is needed to say the Shema. Correspondingly, the building-blocks of words are paragraphs, paragraphs are made up of underlying ideas, and ideas comprise the siddur. Finally, they might have touched on the historical relevance of prayer and the way that prayers recall our history when we touch on biblical passages and biblical narrative during the liturgy.

In sum, these texts should provide an understanding of the Shema as readiness, and as specifically helping us to find power, meaning, relationship, and our voice before we ask for the ultimate gift: a place in the world to come. Through this class, participants might be thinking about individual prayer and how every prayer plays an important and unique role in the liturgy. They might be thinking about their own voice during the Shema and while our voices come together in praise, we also each play our own role in prayer. Finally, the class might also touch on the historical relevance of prayer and the way that prayers recall our history when we touch on biblical passages and biblical narrative during the liturgy.
Through concluding conversation, these ideas might rise through these or other questions:

1. What, in total, do we learn about the role that the Shema plays in our liturgy?
2. How might we be thinking about the Shema differently now?
3. How might we think differently about the role of each piece of prayer in the prayer service overall?
4. More generally, what is prayer to us, now?

If participants have raised ideas about saying the Shema if they do not believe in a transcendent God, this is a time to return to this conversation. Ask participants how they relate to the Shema even without this belief, and what they gained from the texts anyway. What does prayer bring them or accomplish for them? What wisdom do they gain from these texts?

Hebrew Sources

Text #1:

משנה ברכות יב
אבר ווהשע ב קלח לקה שמע להוה אם שמעי אלך כי שכבל עליך ועל מלכות שימם תחלץ ואחר כי
יקבל עליי וול מצוה...

Text #2:

ברכת ד'ט
אמר ר ר' ווהן איוהו ב מת��ה תוהו והסומי נאולה על מתיר...

Text #3:

רש"י מכת ברכות ד' ט א"ם ב
 아마רין בברכות יוהשלמה: כי שמעי תוהה והסומי נאולה על מתיר... לאוהנו של.Floor על פסחא של מילא, כי שמעי תוהה והסומי נאולה על מתיר. אבר ווהשע ב קלח לקה שמע להוה אם שמעי אלך כי שכבל עליי וול מצוה...

משנה ברכות יב
אבר ווהשע ב קלח לקה שמע להוה אם שמעי אלך כי שכבל עליי וול מצוה...

ברכת ד'ט
אמר ר ר' ווהן איוהו ב מת��ה תוהו והסומי נאולה על מתיר...

רש"י מכת ברכות ד' ט א"ם ב
 아마רין בברכות יוהשלמה: כי שמעי תוהה והסומי נאולה על מתיר... לאוהנו של.Floor על פסחא של מילא, כי שמעי תוהה והסומי נאולה על מתיר. אבר ווהשע ב קלח לקה שמע להוה אם שמעי אלך כי שכבל עליי וול מצוה...
Shema: The Shema’s Place in Jewish Liturgy: An Advanced Class

The Global Day of Jewish Learning
November 13, 2011
www.theglobalday.com
Ever since Jacob wrestled with God, Jews have explored our relationship with God and the presence of God in our lives. What are different ideas about God in our tradition? Is it possible to define the concept of “God”? How can we understand God when we only have our own, human language to describe God?

In Psalm 139, the psalmist engages in conversation with God, suggesting, “You have scrutinized me and you know; you know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought from afar... You have restricted me and you have laid your hand on me. Knowledge is beyond me; exalted, I am incapable of it.” Central to the Jewish intellectual and spiritual tradition is our opportunity or responsibility to develop a relationship with God—but what does that mean? Psalm 139 explores this question: God knows us, God knows our moves and our thoughts, God limits us when necessary and God takes action against us, and we understand and revere this—still, we cannot know God. Our tradition is filled with ideas similar to this, acknowledging that it is incumbent upon us to love and fear God, and to come to know God through the mitzvot and through study. At the same time, our tradition suggests, there is rarely one understanding of God, rather there are countless images and understandings of God, manifesting in inspiring and complex ideas. These plentiful ideas can be overwhelming, particularly in a larger culture where for many of us, God-talk is not often prevalent and we have only rare opportunities to talk through with others about how we imagine God.

For the Facilitator

A foundational idea of adult Jewish education (and adult education more generally) is that most adults have significant educations, with graduate degrees and experience in their fields, but their ideas about Jewish life and Jewish thought have not kept up with their secular training. This is particularly true in the area of theology and God-talk, where adults can think abstractly about a number of concepts but have an overly simplistic idea of God, spurred by images of God from great works of art and even from George Burns’ Hollywood character.

Adults’ simplistic or overly literal ideas about God are complicated by our means of communication. Language is limiting, particularly for such a complicated concept as God.

This class is meant to delve into these ideas; for beginners, it aims to free participants from their concrete and straightforward ideas about what God is, and for those who have considered these ideas before, it is meant to provide additional looks at God’s complexity through some rich texts from our tradition.

Specifically, the class was designed to focus on the following things to think about. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings or ideas.
**Things to Think About in this Class**

- God, or the Divine, means many things to each of us.
- Sometimes, our pre-conceived images of God get in the way of our understanding God.
- God, in its oneness, can be conceived both as an anthropomorphic and as a commanding God, with concrete characteristics as a God, and as something ineffable (not possible to understand).
- Tensions exist in the rabbis' ideas themselves about what God is.
- **Question:** What images do I have of God?
- **Question:** How have my images previously limited my understanding of God?

The class begins by trying to expand our ideas about God, suggesting that God is inscrutable, that our language and images of God limit us, and that many of us have overly simple ideas about God. The class then shares five texts, each of which brings a somewhat different perspective on God. Specifically, these ideas are raised:

- God has a variety of attributes, some of which seem to contradict each other; God, therefore, must be a kind of abstract concept where many things are true at once
- Humans are described in the Torah as being created in God's image. Can we enumerate human attributes that would be considered Divine?
- God “struggles” with anger, and the rabbis use human language to describe God and to struggle with God's actions and reactions
- Each of us might understand God in our own, different ways

Collectively, this should allow participants to think about the extent to which we have used language to describe God, which has limited our understanding of what God can be. At the same time, God is many, many things, and our task is to hold onto these things simultaneously. For example, keeping in mind the simultaneous oneness and formlessness of God.

This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Introductory questions
- Rabbi Steinsaltz's texts
- Concluding thoughts from group

**LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Introductory questions
- Rabbi Steinsaltz's texts
- Bereshith Rabba
- Berachot 7a
- Concluding thoughts from group
Introductory questions and Conversation

To begin the class, the facilitator might ask participants to:

- Share what they know about the depiction of God in Jewish texts and tradition
- Share what they think about why characterizing God in Jewish tradition is confusing or challenging (or, share if they think it is confusing)
- Share what their current images of God are (see Conversation: Exploring God, under separate cover, for discussion questions in this area)

Any of these conversations should transition well into examination of the first text.

Texts #1: Ideas from Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz

In these texts from Rabbi Steinsaltz, he shares some of his ideas about the nature of God and also about the nature of how many Jews understand God. The texts have a wide collection of ideas in them and might be quite provocative. Participants might agree or disagree with the idea that we pray without a clear understanding of the words that we say or that God is hard to understand. Whether they agree or disagree, the intent of beginning with these texts is to contextualize further conversation with these ideas, so clarifying the ideas is important.

There are two pieces here, two paragraphs from Rabbi Steinsaltz’s book, Simple Words, and an excerpt from an interview with Rabbi Steinsaltz.

From Simple Words: Thinking about What Really Matters in Life
Perhaps our greatest difficulty in relating to God is our inherent inability to form any coherent understanding of the Almighty. With the millions of words that have been said and written, both for and against, with all the prayers, prayer books, and books on devotion, so much of this subject still remains empty words. The word “God” is indeed used—in public prayers or in unvoiced wishes, in common conversation and in curses—with equal meaninglessness. For most people it means everything—and nothing.

For many people, the image of God is quite clear: a big, white bearded man sitting on a throne very high in the sky. He has—at least figuratively—a stick in one hand, and a bag of candy in the other, bestowing each on His subjects. Many prayers, as well as bitter complaints, ask for more of the candy and less of the stick. You may object and say that such an idea is just childish, kindergarten imagery, but how many people actually continue to develop their religious understanding beyond that age?

 Asked, “Who is God?” Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz provides his personal reflections in the interview below:

**Q:** Characterize God: Is He vengeful, merciful, moody?

**A:** How can one characterize God? Whatever we say is going to be both right and wrong at the same time. All the good, beautiful and sweet things in this world are actually attributes of God, and every day, nay, every moment, we see Him differently. What is the color of a bubble of water? That depends upon the angle from which I look at it, and when I gaze at it long enough, I shall see in it all the colors and hues: Great, Mighty, Compassionate, Gracious, Awesome, Un-understandable—but forever extremely close to me.

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1. Review what he is saying. What are the different points that Rabbi Steinsaltz is making?
2. What are the different ways that Rabbi Steinsaltz characterizes God?
   - What is fundamental to Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas of God?
3. To what extent do you take issue with the questioner’s question?
   - What’s interesting about it, given Rabbi Steinsaltz’s points about God?
4. To what extent do you relate to what he is sharing? What is challenging about it?
   - What is attractive about it?
5. Does his conception surprise you in any way?
6. What are our responsibilities in prayer, according to Rabbi Steinsaltz?
Text #2: Psalm 85

This Psalm offers a tremendous understanding of how we can understand God, collecting a number of God's attributes into one place; God is redeeming, angry, possibly vengeful (“wrath”), loving and kind. It demonstrates that God has human attributes—or, we have attributes that are like God’s—and gives us insight into what God has been in our textual tradition. Focus on lines 11 and 12 with participants; these are rich lines that give us specific insight into God and these complicated characteristics. The next text will comment on these characteristics.

1 To the chief Musician, A Psalm for the sons of Korah.
2 Lord, you have been favorable to your land; you have brought back the captivity of Jacob.
3 You have forgiven the iniquity of your people, you have pardoned all their sin. Selah.
4 You have withdrawn all your wrath; you have turned from the fierceness of your anger.
5 Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cease your anger toward us.
6 Will you be angry with us for ever? Will you draw out your anger to all generations?
7 Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?
8 Show us your loving kindness, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.
9 I will hear what God the Lord will speak; for God will speak peace to God’s people, and to God’s pious ones, but let them not turn back to folly.
10 Surely God’s salvation is near to those who fear God; that glory may dwell in our land.
11 Loving kindness and truth meet; righteousness and peace kiss (confront) each other.
12 Truth shall spring from the earth; and righteousness shall look down from heaven.
13 Also, the Lord shall give that which is good; and our land shall yield her produce.
14 Righteousness shall go before God; and walk in the way of God’s steps.
1. Define the terms “truth,” “lovingkindness,” “righteousness,” and “peace.” (Note that “chesed” does not exactly translate to lovingkindness. What does chesed mean to you?)

2. What does it mean that “truth and lovingkindness should meet”? What is the relationship between truth and lovingkindness?

3. What is the relationship between righteousness and peace? Are they naturally compatible?

4. If not, how do we make room for both?

Text #3: Genesis Rabbah 8:5

In the creation story, when God introduces the idea of creating the human, the Torah states, “And God said, Let Us make Adam in Our own image and Our own likeness. (Genesis 1:26). Note that the name of God (Elohim) is plural and that God refers to God’s self as “Us” and “Our.” The following midrash identifies to whom God was talking when God decided to create the first human. It provides us with an understanding of God’s lovingkindness, of God’s truth; at the same time, it helps us understand that multiple attributes live in one God, and that God’s multiplicity (as shown in the plural “Elohim”) lives in these multiple attributes.

Notice that the narrative is actually structured by a creative reading of the two verses of Psalms 85:11-12. These verses in Psalms are being used as a commentary on the verse in Genesis, “Let Us make Adam in Our own image and in Our own likeness.”

Rabbi Simon said: At the moment the Holy One chose to create the first Adam the ministering angels broke up into factions. Some of them said, “Create him,” while others said, “Don’t do it.” Thus it is written: “Lovingkindness and truth will meet, righteousness and peace will kiss.” (Psalms 85:11)

**Lovingkindness said:** Create him, for he will do acts of lovingkindness.

**Truth said:** Don’t create him, for he is drenched in lies.

**Righteousness said:** Create him, for he will do much Tzedaka.

**Peace said:** Don’t do it, for he is essentially quarrelsome.

What did the Holy One do? God took Truth and cast it toward the earth. Thus it is written, “And truth will be cast to the earth” (Daniel 8:12).

The ministering angels said: Sovereign of the Universe, why do You shame the leader of Your court? Let truth rise from the earth. Thus it is written: “Truth will arise from the earth” (Psalms 85:12).

1. Summarize the text. What is happening here? What different ideas are conveyed?

2. What, specifically, do you think is meant by the following phrases?
   - Compassion and truth are opposite
   - Humanity is the enemy of truth and peace and the friends of compassion and righteousness
   - Truth is cast to the ground and then it flourishes from the earth

3. Is “truth” sacrificed for “lovingkindness and righteousness”?

4. What do you learn about the nature of God from this text? What about the nature of people?
Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Berachot 7a

The following texts are meant to contrast the texts that we just read. Here, God expresses intentions, struggles with mercy (don’t many of us!), and has a head, which God nods. God seems surprisingly (perhaps) like us! What does this represent, on the part of the rabbis—their own struggles to understand God’s actions? Their reverting to their own ways of understanding the world when trying to describe God’s actions? Participants should explore these questions and also why the rabbis might have understood and portrayed God in this way, when God is also understood in ways that we just discussed in the previous set of texts. What do we do with these different ideas? How do they relate to each other?

Rabbi Johanan says in the name of Rabbi Jose: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be God, says prayers? Because it says: Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. (Isaiah 56:7) It is not said, ‘their prayer’, but ‘My prayer’; hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be God, says prayers.

What does God pray?—Rabbi Zutra ben Tobi said in the name of Rab: ‘May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice.’

It was taught: Rabbi Ishmael ben Elisha says: I once entered into the innermost part [of the Sanctuary] to offer incense and saw Akathriel Yah [the Divine Crown of God], the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne. God said to me: Ishmael, My son, bless Me! I replied: May it be Your will that Your mercy may suppress Your anger and Your mercy may prevail over Your other attributes, so that You may deal with Your children according to the attribute of mercy and may, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice! And God nodded to me with God’s head.

1. Summarize the texts. What is happening here? How is God portrayed?
2. How do these images of God compare to what we read in the above set of texts?
3. Why is this an interesting question to the rabbis?
4. In your mind, why might God pray? Why might justice and mercy be in conflict?
5. What do these texts, these ideas, tell us about what God is and can be?
6. In this text, the rabbis seem to suggest that they have a collective or similar understanding of God. To what extent can an objective experience of God be summoned—what do you think?
Text #5: Exodus Rabbah 5.9

As a concluding text, this piece brings together a variety of the ideas mentioned and also adds another: Perhaps God is multi-faceted, and also, perhaps we each understand God differently. Does God also “speak” to each of us differently?

“For who is there of all flesh, that has heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire, as we have, and lived?” (Deuteronomy 5:23). Come and see how the voice went forth to all of Israel, to each and every one in keeping with his particular capacity—to the elderly in keeping with their capacity, to young men in keeping with their capacity, to the little ones in keeping with their capacity, and to the women in keeping with their capacity. As it is said, “Moshe spoke and God answered him with a voice”—a voice that he would have been able to withstand. R. Yose bar Hanina said: If you are astounded at such an assertion, then draw the relevant inference from the manna, which came down for Israel varying in taste, in keeping with each Israelite’s particular need—to young men it tasted like bread, to the elderly it tasted like wafers made with honey, to sucklings it tasted like milk from their mother’s breast, to the sick it tasted like fine flour mingled with honey, while for the heathen it tasted as bitter as linseed. Now, if the manna, which was all of the same kind, changed into so many kinds to provide for the particular need of each individual, was it not possible for the voice, in which there is such divine strength, to vary according to the capacity of each individual, so that no harm should befall him? Hence Job said, “God thunders marvelously with God’s voice” (Job 37:5).

1. Summarize the text. What is being communicated? What is the logic behind the conclusion?
2. How does this text contrast with the other texts reviewed?
3. What might have generated this midrash, this conception of God? Is is something that you relate to?
4. What does the text suggest for the Jewish understanding of God, for our understanding of God that we invoke when we say the Shema?

CONCLUSION

This class began with some of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s words and with his assertion that many of us merely pray, without a clear understanding of what we are praying to.

To close the class, the facilitator may want to return to that assertion, asking participants if they have a more clear understanding of their ideas about God—no matter how abstract those might be – and about whom they might say Shema, after this conversation. Specifically, how do participants bring together different ideas about God? What different, simultaneous things do they believe about God? How will they influence how participants say the Shema going forward?

The facilitator might also want to ask participants what was challenging about this class—which, for many, may have been a unique opportunity to talk about God. Was it comfortable or uncomfortable? Engaging? Off-putting? Overwhelming? The facilitator probably wants to give participants an opportunity to share some of these feelings before the class concludes.

And, the facilitator might want to raise the question of how we live with questions about God—how we act as committed, practicing Jews without a final understanding of what God is.

Finally, the facilitator might want to raise the question of pictures of God, the images of God that we see regularly around us. How do we avoid returning to overly simplistic ideas of God, given the art that we see and language that we hear? How do we communicate about God, given the limitations of human language?
Worship of one God is the founding principle of Judaism and the focus of the Shema. Radical for its time, monotheism is today a dominant idea in Western culture, and something that we rarely think about. This class helps us to consider the dangers, complexities, or even the attractions of idol worship, ideas that may be new and unusual for us today.

The rabbis discussed idolatry extensively throughout Jewish intellectual history. In this class, texts introduce us to the nuances of idol worship and how it was understood, primarily by the rabbis. The class also gives perspective on what the underlying psychology behind idol worship might have been, and gives us an opportunity to consider how we might engage in a kind of idol worship today, in a modern form.

For the Facilitator

This class moves through six key texts and then provides a set of questions and ideas for consideration at the class’s conclusion, bringing the conversation to modern day. After exploring some of the attractions and complexities of idol worship, the reasons that human beings might have engaged in idol worship throughout history, Participants have an opportunity to think about what they might worship and how this seemingly irrelevant commandment plays a role in our lives today.

One of the key ideas in this class relates to the dangers and attractions of idolatry, the reasons for and dangers of humanity’s worship of idols. Yoram Hazony, a contemporary political philosopher based in Israel, sheds light on this idea and the texts we will study. These are paragraphs that the facilitator could choose to share with participants or use as background in leading the conversation. Note that Hazony is discussing pagan sacrifice of humans in order to produce rain.

The point is that idolatry is not a perfect falsehood, such as one would have if these murders were committed and the rains then did not come. On the contrary, the obstinate persistence of idolatry derived precisely from the element of truth that was in it: They would kill a human being and the rain in fact would come. And from the perspective of the idolater, the relation between the two events appeared effective, undeniable and true. The flaw lies not in the idolater’s willingness to accept falsehood, but in his unwillingness to consider causes and effects (“truths”) other than the most local ones visible to him within his own perspective. The idolatrous farmer believes that his need for rain can be alleviated through murder, because no other causes for rain are considered beyond the most local one—his own actions and those of his priest; likewise, the idolatrous farmer believes that his need for rain can justify murder, because no other effects of murder are considered beyond the most local one—his own betterment and that of his priest. Idolatry is thus in its core an arrogance: The belief that the local truth of one’s own perspective comprises truth as a whole—that one-seventieth of the truth is truth itself, when this one-seventieth amounts to a barren lie.

Hazony, ultimately (in this text) understands idolatry as an arrogant act, an act that sees human will as more powerful than the ways of the world or the ways of God. There seems to be truth to it—there is explanation—he says, and so people find it attractive. Its danger lies in its power.
Participants should be able to understand these ideas through this class.

More specifically, the class was designed to focus on the following things to think about. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

**Things to Think About in this Class**

- Idol worship is attractive. It seems to give us control over our lives.
- But, idol worship actually reflects our arrogance, our idea that we can control the world and its powers.
- Idol worship reflects our potential inability to manage our destructive behaviors.
- **Question:** We have our own idols, today. What are they, and how do we engage in idol worship?

Together, each text contributes to an understanding of the nature of idol worship, why it was seen as attractive and how it can be threatening in a broader psychological context.

This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Ask about the definition of idolatry
- Look at Sanhedrin 102b
- Close the conversation by asking about the relevance of idolatry in our lives today; if time, share Rabbi Steinsaltz’s text with participants

**LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Ask about the definition of idolatry
- Begin with Exodus and continue with Sanhedrin 102b
- Look at Avodah Zara 55a
- Look at Akedat Yitzchak
- Close the conversation by discussing the presence of idolatry in our lives today

**ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)**
- Ask about the definition of monotheism and explore the Ten Commandments with participants
- Look at the Exodus text
- Begin with Exodus and continue with Sanhedrin 102b
- **Break**
- Look at both texts from Avodah Zara
- Look at Akedat Yitzchak
- Close with the provided questions and conversation topics
OPENING CONVERSATION
The facilitator might begin by asking participants to define idolatry, sharing what they think it means, and asking what monotheism means to them as the central principle of Jewish tradition and law. The facilitator might then turn to the Ten Commandments, providing participants with a list and asking participants which are their “favorites.” Idolatry will probably not be among them, leading participants into a series of questions: What is the significance of Judaism being a monotheistic religion? What does it mean that we don’t talk about idolatry very much today? Is this prohibition still significant to us in our days? Have we evolved past it?

Text #1: Exodus 20:1-6

This a primary text that establishes the Jewish relationship with the one God. We have printed here the full text, which details at length instructions to worship only the Lord and to avoid the appearance of worshiping other gods, avoid images and prostration. This will be the first time that some participants are seeing these words or looking at them carefully. As the facilitator, you may want to read them closely with participants, even splitting participants into chevruta—pairs, challenging participants to understand fully what they are reading. Why each of these commandments?

1. God spoke all these words, to say:
2. “I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.
3. You shall not have the gods of others in My presence.
4. You shall not make for yourself a graven image or any likeness which is in the heavens above, which is on the earth below, or which is in the water beneath the earth.
5. You shall neither prostrate yourself before them nor worship them, for I, the Lord, your God, am a zealous God, Who visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons, upon the third and the fourth generation of those who hate Me,
6. and I perform loving kindness to thousands [of generations], to those who love Me and to those who keep My commandments.

1. Summarize the text. According to this text, what is considered to be prohibited idol worship?
2. Are there any surprises here? Any interesting twists?
3. How many commandments are there here? How are they different from each other?
4. What is the role of verses 5 and 6? Why are they connected to the prohibition of idol worship?
5. What do these words mean for us, in today’s context?
6. What kind of monotheism does this text establish for us? What does this say about the nature of our worship—what is our worship supposed to be?
Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 102b

This rich text is, essentially, about the attraction of idol worship and the predominance of idol worship at different points in Jewish society.

Rav Ashi was a fourth century Talmud hacham, a tremendous scholar who established (or, reestablished) the great Talmudic academy at Sura, in Babylonia, and who collected and redacted the Babylonian Talmud. He had ensured the vibrancy of Jewish life in the Babylonian exile and helped to create the Jewish tradition that we celebrate today.

Menashe was one of three kings denied a place in the World to Come; in Menashe’s case, as king of Judah, he reinstituted pagan worship. Menashe was king of Israel centuries before Rav Ashi’s time. This interaction, then, occurs to make a point: that idol worship is difficult to ignore or abstain from.

This Talmudic text is rich in its context and the picture and emotion that it brings to life. The facilitator might want to spend time on it, piecing it apart.

Prior to this piece of text, the Talmud explains that Rav Ashi lectured to his students about the three kings but stopped when he got sick, and he assumed that he became ill because he was teaching about these heretics.

Rav Ashi used to lecture about the three kings of Israel who do not have portion in the World to Come. … One night, Menashe, one of these kings, appeared to Rav Ashi in a dream, saying, You have called us your colleagues and the colleagues of your father; now, from what part [of the bread] is [the piece for reciting] the ha-motzi blessing to be taken? [Rav Ashi] said to him: I do not know. [Menashe] said to him: You haven’t learned this, and yet you call us your colleagues! He said to him: Teach it to me, and tomorrow I will teach it in your name at the session. He answered: From the part that is baked into a crust. [Rav Ashi] then questioned him: Since you are so wise, why did you worship idols? He replied: Were you there, you would have caught up the skirt of your garment and sped after me because of the idolatrous impulse that ruled. The next day, he observed to the students: We will commence with our teachers [referring to the Three Kings].

1. Summarize this text. What happens in it? What are all of the dynamics?
2. Even Rav Ashi, this tremendous scholar and founder of a yeshiva, would have been unable to resist the allure of idol worship! Why?
3. And Menashe, who was an idol worshiper, knew something that Rav Ashi did not. How do we understand this?
4. Menashe lived in the 600s BCE in Judah, and Rav Ashi a thousand years later in Babylonia. What might have been different about their surroundings? Is it a value for us to resist elements of the dominant culture of our times?
5. What does this text say about judging the heresies of another?
Text #3: Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 17a

This Talmudic story sheds light on idolatry by comparing it to other behaviors and helping us to learn from all of them. In it, the Talmud assumes that idolatry is the only sin that requires death along with renunciation in order to be forgiven and granted a place in the World to Come. Here, an individual – a rabbi – visits countless prostitutes until one finally suggests to him that he will not be able to repent for his behavior and be accepted into the World to Come. However, ultimately, his repentance is accepted because he offers his death in exchange for redemption. It is not only idolatry, therefore, that demands this ultimate penance before the sinner can enter the World to Come.

This text has implications for how we understand idolatry, suggesting that it is the behaviors behind idolatry – here, compulsive behavior, obsession, and – really – giving into one’s “evil impulse” toward destructive actions – that lead one away from the World to Come, rather than idolatry itself. We all feel compelled to do things that aren’t good for the world, for us, or for God. We don’t have to give into these impulses. The behavior of Eleazar b. Dordia and that of the idolater are similar: Both give into what they are feeling, putting their will over all else.

And does not one die from renouncing sins other [than idolatry]? Surely it has been taught: It was said of Rabbi Eleazar b. Dordia that he did not leave out any harlot in the world without coming to her. Once, on hearing that there was a certain harlot in one of the towns by the sea who accepted a purse of denarii for her hire, he took a purse of denarii and crossed seven rivers for her sake. As he was with her, she blew... wind and said: As this foul smell will not return to its place, so will Eleazar b. Dordia never be received in repentance.

He thereupon went, sat between two hills and mountains and exclaimed: O, hills and mountains, plead for mercy for me! They replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed! So he exclaimed: Heaven and earth, plead for mercy for me! They, too, replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment. He then exclaimed: Sun and moon, plead for mercy for me! But they also replied: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, Then the moon shall be confounded and the sun ashamed. He exclaimed: Stars and constellations, plead for mercy for me! Said they: How shall we pray for you? We stand in need of it ourselves, for it is said, And all the hosts of heaven shall moulder away. Said he: The matter then depends upon me alone! Having placed his head between his knees, he wept aloud until his soul departed.

Then a heavenly voice was heard proclaiming: Rabbi Eleazar b. Dordia is destined for the life of the world to come! Now, here was a case of a sin [other idolatry] and yet he he had to die!—In that case, too, since he was so much addicted to immorality it is as [if he had been guilty of] idolatry. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi [on hearing of it] wept and said: One may acquire eternal life after many years, while another in only one hour! Rabbi also said: Not only is his repentance accepted, he is even called “Rabbi.”

1. Summarize the text. What is the basic plot? What ideas are being communicated?
2. How would you describe Eleazar Ben Dordia’s behavior? (Remember that he saw not just one harlot and not just a few harlots but every harlot in the land.)
3. Why does Eleazar Ben Dordia’s wake up call come from the harlot? Why does that get his attention?
4. What is the connection between compulsive behavior and idolatry?
5. Why was it too late for Eleazar Ben Dordia to fix his life?
6. Define idolatry taking into account all these texts. How does this text suggest a refining of “idolatry?”
Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zara 55a

With the the prevalence and power of idol worship as context, the facilitator can turn the participants to this text, which demonstrates the specific attraction of idol worship. In the text, idol worship seems to give the worshiper a feeling of control over events in this world. By serving the gods, the idol worshiper can protect his or her own interests—idol worship is attractive, as it gets us what we want. But, the consequences of idol worship can be worse than the precipitating cause. In this case, the lack of rain leads a society to murder!

As the group probes the text, the facilitator might want to explore the extent to which idol worship places our will over anything else—and, at the same time, without rain, an agricultural society is destroyed. How does Jewish tradition, or monotheism, answer this challenge?

Raba son of Rabbi Isaac said to Rab Judah: ‘There is an idolatrous shrine in our place, and whenever the world is in need of rain, [the idol] appears to [its priests] in a dream, saying, “Slay a human being to me and I will send rain.” They slay a human being to it and rain does come!’

1. Summarize the text. What is happening here?
2. According to this text, what is the attraction of idol worship? Why might the rabbis be talking about this?
3. Similarly, what are the dangers of idol worship?

Text #5: Rabbi Isaac Arama, Akedat Yitzchak

In this 15th century Spanish text, a community leader describes a different kind of idolatry with examples that seem disturbingly similar to those we might use today. In invoking Job, the text also raises the idea that worshiping idols is an act equivalent to abandoning the entire Torah. In introducing the text, you will want to situate it for participants in 15th century Spain, noting that Arama was expelled from Spain during the Inquisition and that he ultimately settled and lived the rest of his life in Naples.

Under the category of idolatry we must include a form which is particularly virulent today— the devoting of all energies and thoughts to the accumulation of wealth and achievement of worldly success. These are the mighty gods on which they rely, to which they pay allegiance and for which they repudiate the Lord on High and forsake His Torah, leaving it deserted and forlorn in a remote corner. This is the very essence of idolatry. Job proclaimed that he had never been tainted by it, in the text: “If I have made gold my hope, and have said to fine gold: Thou art my confidence; if I rejoiced because my wealth was great and because my hand had gotten much” (Job 31, 24-25).

1. What is interesting about the timing and setting of this text?
2. Why might the writer equate idol worship with an emphasis on wealth and with abandoning the Torah? How are these pieces connected?
CONCLUDING CONVERSATION

To conclude the conversation, you might want to focus on a straightforward but challenging set of questions: What is our attraction to idol worship today? What are our idols today?

In leading this conversation, two “texts” might support you.

1. Bring up a picture of the American Idol logo. Why does the group think the producers decided to call this show “American Idol”? Does it have anything to do with the Jewish concept of idolatry?

2. A final text by Rabbi Steinsaltz, below, further explores the role of money and other possible obsessions in our lives. What are our idols today, and how do we interact with them?

Finally, you might turn to a conversation about idols in your own lives, in your community, in our political system. When do we manage our worship of idols?

Money, by its very definition, is never an end. It is a way of exchanging, acquiring things. When it becomes an obsession, when it becomes an end in itself, that obsession is a slightly pathological obsession. This is true about anything. Chewing is a way of eating. When a person begins to chew before he eats, it is a sign of an illness. Washing your hands is very important to cleanliness. When you see a person washing his hands sixty times a day, it is a sign of compulsiveness. Money is a way of transforming assets into other things, whatever they are. If it becomes a purpose in itself, then it is defined psychologically as a perversion... something that is auxiliary but that becomes a purpose in itself.

Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, “Is Money Our God?”
Monotheism is one of the great contributions of the Jewish people. What does it mean to us that God is one?

Shema Yisrael proclaims God’s oneness. As we explore the Shema, it seems important that we explore what we proclaim when we say its words. In this class, we will look at fundamental texts that describe the nature of monotheism and the behavior of idolaters and we consider what these historic Jewish ideas mean for us.

❖ For the Facilitator

These texts review where monotheism is affirmed in our texts, how it is emphasized, and how oneness is understood in our tradition. In addition to pointing our attention to monotheism, the class raises interesting ideas about what “oneness” is.

The facilitator might draw texts from this conversation and from another class, “The Challenge of Idolatry.”

Specifically, the class was designed to focus on the following things to think about. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

❖ Things to Think About in this Class

- Prohibitions against idol worship in Jewish tradition are thorough and intense. Idol worship is equated to abandonment of Judaism altogether.
- “Oneness” is a way of thinking that has permeated Jewish tradition.
- Question: What does monotheism mean to us today?

The class begins with an interesting idea from Rabbi Steinsaltz that puts forward the concept of “monistic thinking,” a way of looking at the world that emphasizes its oneness. By beginning the class with this text, the facilitator has an opportunity to introduce a foundational idea that will bring together the other texts: participants can understand complicated ideas about God through this idea of monistic thinking, and so on.

At the close of the class, the facilitator might want to return to this text to see how the other texts have enriched their understanding of Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas.

This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

SHORT (30 MINUTES)
- Ask about the definition of monotheism
- Look at the Maimonides text
- Close the conversation by asking about the relevance of monotheism in our lives today
LONGER (60 MINUTES)
- Ask about the definition of monotheism and explore the Ten Commandments with participants
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas
- Look at the Exodus text
- Look at the Maimonides text
- Close the conversation by asking about the relevance of monotheism in our lives today

ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)
- Ask about the definition of monotheism and explore the Ten Commandments with participants
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas
- Look at the Exodus text
- Break
- Look at both midrashim, at Sifre BaMidbar and Deuteronomy Rabbah
- Look at the Maimonides text
- Close with the provided questions and conversation topics

OPENING CONVERSATION
As in the companion class, The Challenge of Idolatry, the facilitator might begin by asking participants to define idolatry, sharing what they think it means, and asking what it means to them as the central principle of Jewish tradition and law. Here, the facilitator might also ask participants to define monotheism. The facilitator might then turn to the Ten Commandments, providing participants with a list and asking participants which are their “favorites.” Idolatry will probably not be among them, leading participants into a series of questions: What is the significance of Judaism being a monotheistic religion? What does it mean that we don’t talk about monotheism very much today? Is this prohibition still significant to us in our days?


In this text, Rabbi Steinsaltz writes about the influence of “monistic thinking,” or unified thinking, on Jewish tradition. He suggests that themes of oneness pervade Jewish tradition and Jewish life in their entirety. Specifically, these paragraphs suggest that even with the complexity of God and of other ideas in life, these concepts are unified, and their dichotomous nature shows several sides to the same thing. Everything emerges “from a single point of origin,” even when things are multi-faceted.

The monistic perception is more than just seeing a single all-embracing law. It assumes there is a fundamental principle for the entire aggregate of existence in all its manifestations, and that everything within this aggregate is generated from that basic law....

The belief in one God is not merely an abstract statement about some kind of reality that exists outside of ourselves. It also implies the supremacy of this single essential entity within all reality: all particularities with their differences
and divisions, are unified and subject to a single authority. In this regard, every monistic perception is a kind of comprehensive statement – even if not in religious language – of the very same thing, that is to say, the presupposition of the existence of a unified essence from which the different particularities are constructed and are given significance.

Sometimes the monistic perception is completely unified. That is, it sees everything as emerging from a single point of origin. Sometimes it sees a dichotomous world picture. But even such a dichotomous view is merely a complex form of the unified perception, because according to this perception a single pair of opposites explains all phenomena.

1. Summarize the text. What is Rabbi Steinsaltz trying to communicate?
2. How do his ideas resonate with you? Where do you see these ideas in the world, or in Jewish life and tradition?
3. In the context of this text, how do monotheism and monistic thinking influence us today?

Text #2: Exodus 20:1-6

The facilitator can now turn the group to this primary text that establishes the Jewish relationship with a monotheistic God. We have printed here the full text, which details at greater length (than is in the Ten Commandments/Aseret HaDibrot) instructions to worship only God and to avoid the appearance of worshipping other gods, avoiding images and prostration. This will likely be the first time that many are seeing these words or looking at them carefully. As the facilitator, you may want to read the words closely with participants, even splitting them into chevruta - pairs, challenging participants to understand fully what they are reading. What do these words suggest for us? How do we understand these acts or behaviors today?

It seems important to raise here the question of, Why monotheism? Or more accurately, what is the agreement made between the Israelites and the one God – what is the agreement made in this text? What is promised by God in exchange for belief and worship? Why is this important?

There is a challenging piece here, suggesting that God “visits” the deeds of the parents on the children, that God punishes the children for the parents’ misdoings. Participants may take exception to this idea. Without straying too far from the texts here, facilitators have an opportunity to explore how participants understand God, why this is an uncomfortable idea, and the extent to which a “unified” God does not suggest a “uniform” God. This, perhaps, is monistic thinking: the idea that oneness can exist even in complexity, and that oneness can include seeming contradictions.
1. Summarize the text. According to this text, what is considered to be prohibited idol worship?
2. Are there any surprises here? Any interesting twists?
3. What is the role of verses 5 and 6? Why are they connected to the prohibition of idol worship?
4. What do these words mean for us, in today's context?
5. What kind of monotheism does this text establish for us? What does this say about the nature of our worship?
6. How does this relate to Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas about monistic thinking?

Text #3: Sifre BaMidbar Parshat Shelach 111

This text establishes the importance of monotheism in the context of other mitzvoth: It is equal to all of the other commandments, all of the Torah. How does this establish Judaism as a strongly monotheistic religion? What is the power of this statement?

Anyone who acknowledges idolatry disavows the Ten Commandments and everything Moses was commanded, and everything the Prophets were commanded, and everything the Patriarchs were commanded. And anyone who disavows idolatry acknowledges the entire Torah.

1. Summarize the text. What kind of statement is this? Why might it have been expressed?
2. Why do you think the Talmud goes so far as to equate rejection of idolatry with embracing the entirety of Judaism?
3. Is the prohibition of idol worship significant in your own Judaism? If so, how?

Text #4: Deuteronomy Rabbah 2

This brief statement establishes a defining factor of God’s oneness: God’s uniqueness. And, from the concept of Oneness comes God’s otherness, that God is not us and was not created. Oneness means that in all of creation God is distinguished by not having been created. Oneness is God; God, alone, is truly unique.
The Holy One, blessed be God, thus addressed Israel. See, my sons! See all that I have created. I have created in pairs, heaven and earth—a pair. Sun and moon—a pair. Adam and Eve—a pair. This world and the world to come—a pair. But My glory is one and unique in the world.

Text 5: Maimonides, The Laws of Idolatry, Chapter 1

Here, Maimonides describes how idolatry was introduced to the world. After all, if God was the Creator, how did people lose their way (and turn toward idolatry), and when did it happen? In his description, Maimonides seems to indicate that it was an innocent mistake, that worship of the one God came first and that idol worship was a corruption of monotheism. If that was the case, why was the sin of idolatry considered so severe? Maimonides seems to be saying something about human will: that we can manage our desires. At the same time, he also suggests that idolatry is, too, part of the worship of God; even while we should be denying our possible compulsion toward idolatry, it was in reaction to the one God that this compulsion developed. In idolatry, too, we find monistic thinking. At the same time, the concept of using stand-ins for God became corrupt. Maimonides suggests that the practice moved quickly away from being related to God and became about human will. This, perhaps, took it outside of monistic thinking—when we began not to praise but to worship, we split our attentions and made our desires more important than God’s creations.

Note in line 3 that Maimonides seems to address God and perhaps assure God that the people truly do understand that the God is the one God. Is Maimonides changing his tone here? What is the role of that line?

1. The sages in the days of Enoch and Enoch himself decided that since God created the stars and heavenly spheres in order to govern the world, they are God’s faithful servants. Thus the stars are worthy of praise, and it corresponds to God’s will.

2. With this idea in mind, they started to build temples for the stars, make sacrifices to them, and laud them. All of it was done with the aim of fulfilling the Creator’s will. This marked the beginning of idolatry.

3. Thus idol worshipers do not claim that a concrete star is a god. Everybody knows that only You are God. Yet people err in that they consider the unwarranted actions to be fulfillment of Your will.

4. Many days have passed and false prophets have surfaced. They started telling that God ordered them to convey to the people: “Serve some the star, make sacrifices to it, build temples to it, and create its image so that people could worship it.” They showed the people a certain form that they themselves invented and said, “This is an image imparted on me in prophesy.”

5. This is how they started creating images in temples and gathering there for worship. They suggested to the people that the image can bring evil or good, and one should fear or serve it. The cult servants convinced them: “Propagate the service and it will bring you luck; do this or that, or don’t do this or that.”
1. Follow the progression of idolatry as Maimonides describes it. Pinpoint the place where idolatry seems to be called tantamount to betrayal and explain why. In other words, when does an error become rebellion?
2. According to Maimonides’ description, what is corrupt about idolatry, other than the fact that it is wrong?
3. Is Maimonides taking responsibility for the people’s idol worship? What are the implications of this?

CONCLUSION

In a concluding conversation, the facilitator might want to focus on a few questions that will help participants remember and internalize what they have discussed:

- What have we learned about monotheism?
- What is aberrant about idolatry?
- What was surprising about what we learned?
- How does oneness impact our lives?
- How will we understand the words of the Shema differently going forward?
- Why is the Shema so central to prayer that we are commanded to say it morning and night?

The facilitator might also turn the conversation back to the first text, to Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas, and ask participants how they understand the text differently after completing the conversation and study.
The words of the Shema themselves command us to hear or listen. What are we hearing or listening to, and what can we learn from Jewish texts about what “Shema” means? What does it mean to hear or listen?

When one is in prayer and recites the Shema, it is very much a simple declaration of Israel’s unique relationship with the Creator. The words of the Shema are unique, beginning with a specific call. We say these words regularly, and it is easy to miss the significance of this call: What does it mean to hear? What does it mean to hear the Shema?

In this class and the accompanying class on “witnessing,” we will explore the complexities behind the declaration that is traditionally proclaimed within every morning and evening prayer, learning from the concepts of hearing and witnessing as explored within classical Jewish texts.

For the Facilitator

This lesson features five texts on hearing, each relates to the Shema and to a great act of Israelite hearing, the receipt of Aseret HaDibrot, the “10 Commandments.” Implicit in the texts are these connections:

- The act of “receiving” Aseret HaDibrot was not just one of receiving. It was participation through the art of listening.
- In order to listen carefully, the Israelites prepared or were prepared (by God) in a certain way.
- The moment of receiving Aseret HaDibrot was a great moment of entrance into relationship. When we enter into a relationship, we have certain responsibilities that need to be heard and understood.

Later in the class, the texts turn to ideas about readiness—how we need to be prepared to listen—and to the ways that each of us listen or hear differently.

Most significantly, the class sheds light on what it means to listen, helping us to understand Shema as a call to listen to each other, and helping us to understand more generally what it means to listen in our lives. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

Things to Think About in this Class

- Hearing and listening in this context are careful acts. They are two-way exchanges, where the listener or hearer is active, not passive.
- Each of us listens or hears differently. Communication sometimes changes, or needs to change, in order to help each person understand what is being said.
- Sometimes, we need to be readied to “hear” something fully.
- Question: What is my state of mind when I normally say the Shema? How am I “hearing”—internalizing, preparing to enact—the ideas embedded in the Shema and the V’Ahava? How do I respond to what I am hearing?
- Question: What is the relationship between simply listening to something and listening in order to ultimately follow what is being said?
This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Hold a brief discussion about hearing, listening, and the Shema
- Look at the Shema itself (text #1)
- Look at the last text from Pesikta deRav Kehana that focuses on the revelation and on individual listening
- Close the conversation by talking about communal hearing and individual hearing. What do both mean, and how does each play a role in Jewish tradition and prayer?

**LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Hold a brief discussion about hearing and listening
- Look at the Shema text and at both Pesikta deRav Kehana texts. What does each say about what it means to listen?
- Close the conversation with any of the concluding conversations or questions

**ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)**
- Introduce the session with the outlined questions and discussion topics
- Look at the Shema itself (text #1)
- Review Deuteronomy Rabbah and Exodus
- **Break**
- Look at both Pesikta deRav Kahana texts
- Close with the provided questions and conversation topics

**Introductory Questions and Conversation**

*The facilitator might want to begin with the following questions or items for discussion:*

- When we say the Shema, what are we thinking about? Particularly when we say the words “Shema Yisrael,” what goes through our minds?
- What does it mean to listen or hear? What is the difference? (The facilitator might want to bring dictionary definitions of the two words to help clarify meaning.)
- When we say the Shema, do we mean “hear” or “listen”? (Does listen suggest a responsibility for behavior or action?)
- What does it mean for a *people* to hear, as opposed to individuals?
- How do we show that we hear or listen?
- How do we hear differently when we are speaking to someone we have a relationship with someone and when we are speaking with someone whom we do not know?

Exploring any of these questions will prepare participants to consider the various themes of this session.
Text #1: Shema Yisrael, Deuteronomy 6:4

This text begins by focusing participants specifically on the introduction of the Shema, “Hear, Israel.”
Is it a commandment? An introduction? Why are these words there?

Hear Israel, the Lord (is) our God, the Lord is one.

1. Why are these first words, Shema Yisrael, necessary? Wouldn’t Israel have listened anyway?
2. Take apart the text, if you can. Is the text saying, I am the Lord? Is it saying, I, the Lord?
   Is this a lesson or a statement? Does it matter?

Text #2: Deuteronomy Rabbah

This midrash suggests that the Shema was used at Mount Sinai when God presented the Aseret HaDibrot, the Ten Commandments (or Ten Utterings) to Israel. According to this midrash, the first commandment was prefaced by God saying “Shema Yisrael” and then Israel answering: “Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad.” It seems that when God says, “I am the Lord, your God,” the people indicates their positive hearing by responding with a similar affirmation, almost saying, Yes! The Lord is our God, and the Lord is one! This midrash offers a picture of active listening, suggesting that receipt of information is acknowledged with a statement of acceptance and affirmation.

How did Israel merit to recite the Shema? Rabbi Pinchas bar Chama said: Israel merited to recite Shema from the Giving of the Torah. How so? You find that God only began [the Aseret HaDibrot] with this speech. God said to them “Shema Yisrael: I am the Lord Your God.” Israel all answered and said “Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad” and Moses said “Baruch shem kevod malchuto l’olam va’ed.”

1. What connection does the midrash draw between Shema Yisrael and the Aseret HaDibrot? Why are these two statements connected together?
2. What is the importance of Israel actively accepting the Ten Commandments? What is the importance of issuing response when listening—what is the importance of issuing this kind of strong response, in this case?
3. What does this text say about the nature of listening? How do the Israelites listen—what kind of listening do they practice?
By reading these selections from Exodus, the conversation turns to the collective Israelite experience as they prepared to listen. The Biblical account of the giving of the Torah is overwhelming, scary, and seems almost beyond the people’s capacity. The experience seems to be imposed from above. There is no mention of individual experience—it is the experience of the people all together, overpowered by the Divine. What does this tell us about the preparation necessary to listen or to truly hear something?

19.16 It came to pass on the third day when it was morning, that there were thunder claps and lightning flashes, and a thick cloud was upon the mountain, and a very powerful blast of a shofar, and the entire nation that was in the camp shuddered.

17 Moses brought the people out toward God from the camp, and they stood at the bottom of the mountain.

18 And the entire Mount Sinai smoked because the Lord had descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of the kiln, and the entire mountain quaked violently.

19 The sound of the shofar grew increasingly stronger; Moses would speak and God would answer him with a voice.

20 The Lord descended upon Mount Sinai, to the peak of the mountain, and the Lord summoned Moses to the peak of the mountain, and Moses ascended.

20.1 God spoke all these words, to respond:

2 “I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” ...

15 And all the people saw the voices and the torches, the sound of the shofar, and the smoking mountain, and the people saw and trembled; so they stood from afar.

16 They said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear, but let God not speak with us lest we die.”

1. Summarize this text. What is interesting to you about it?
2. How would you describe the people’s experience at Mount Sinai? Why did this happen, do you think?
3. What does it mean that the people couldn’t hear God’s words, but could only hear Moses? What do we learn from this about how we hear successfully?
4. What participation do the people have in the giving of the Torah? How do they listen?
5. Does this text change your understanding at all of the midrash (Deuteronomy Rabbah) that we just read?
6. Are there times in our lives where we prepare intensively for an act of listening? What are the similarities?
Text #4: Pesikta deRav Kehana

In the first commandment, or first line, of Aseret HaDibrot, God says “Anochi Adonai” rather than “Ani Adonai,” the more typical way of saying, “I.” This midrash offers an explanation of the choice of words, that the Israelites would understand “anochi” better than they would “ani.” The midrash seems to advocate for an understanding of listening that aligns listening with the communication style of the listener. In other words, is it possible that God chose to use “anochi” so that there would be no misunderstandings, because those who were hearing understood “anochi” better than “ani”? It is hard to hear when we don’t understand; it is hard to communicate when the listener can’t understand the language we are using.

The text of Pesikta de Rav Kahana was probably composed sometime between the 5th and 8th centuries CE. The word pesikta means “the section” or “the portion.” The Pesikta de-Rav Kahana contains homilies on portions of the Torah and haftarah readings for the festivals and special Sabbaths. This and the next text are both from Pesikta deRav Kahana.

Rabbi Nechemiah said: “What is [the word] “Anochi”? It is an Egyptian word. To what can this matter be compared? To a flesh and blood king whose son was captured for a long time. His father took revenge, and brought him back and spoke to him in the language of his captors. So too God—Israel was in Egypt for many years and learned the language of Egypt, when God redeemed them and came to give them the Torah and they did not know how to hear (l’shmoa), G-d said, “I will now speak with them in Egyptian.” G-d said “Anochi” to speak with them in their language, hence “Anochi Adonai elokecha.”

1. According to this midrash, why is it significant that the Torah uses an Egyptian word “Anochi” to begin the Aseret HaDibrot?
2. What might this mean about the connection between the Israelites’ past experience of slavery in Egypt and their current experience of Revelation?
3. What does this explain about listening and hearing? About communicating so that someone else can hear?

Text #5: Pesikta deRav Kehana

Through a careful reading of the text itself, the Pesikta deRav Kahana re-tells the Revelation experience with much more detail than is in the Torah. Here what seemed to be an overwhelming, uniform experience of Revelation is replaced by a description that is focused on individuals’ own experiences, and their capacity to relate to the divine according to who they are and their stage of or station in life. The midrash is especially radical when it compares the experience to looking at a statue, since the prohibition of idol worship is one of the most serious in Judaism! Does the focus on the Israelites differing capacities imply that some were more capable hat others of receiving the divine experience, or simply that they were different? What does the comparison to the manna add to this description?

Ultimately within this context, we can understand this midrash to be providing an understanding of the importance of individual hearing v. communal hearing. How does individual hearing happen? When one communicates with a community, how do we know that individuals hear?
“Rabbi Levi said: The Holy One appeared to them as though He were a statue with faces on every side. A thousand people might be looking at the statue, but it would appear to be looking at each one of them. So, too, when the Holy One spoke, each and every person in Israel could say, “The Divine word is addressing me.” Note that Scripture does not say, “I am the Lord your God,” [in the plural] but “I am the Lord thy God” (Exod. 20:2), [in the singular].

Rabbi Yose bar Rabbi Hanina said: The Divine Word spoke to each and every person according to his particular capacity [“kocho”; literally, “his strength”]. And do not be surprised at this idea. For when manna came down for Israel, each and every person tasted it in keeping with his own capacity—infants in keeping with their capacity, young men in keeping with their capacity, and the elderly in keeping with their capacity. Thus, for the infants—in keeping with their capacity—the manna tasted like mothers' milk. For it is said “its taste was like the taste of rich cream” (Numbers 11:8); young men according to their capacity for it is said “my bread also which I gave you, bread and oil and honey” (Ezekiel 16:19); and old men according to their capacity for it is said “the taste of it was like wafers made with honey” (Exodus 16:31).

Now what was true about the manna—that each and every person tasted it according to his own particular capacity—was equally true about the Divine Word. Each and every person heard it according to his own particular capacity. Thus David said “The voice of the Lord is in strength” (Psalm 29:4)—not “The voice of the Lord is in God’s strength” [as we might expect from standard Hebrew pronoun usage], but the voice of the Lord is in the strength and capacity of each and every person. Therefore the Holy One said: Do not be misled because you hear many voices. Know that I am He who is one and the same: I am the Lord thy God.

1. How does the midrash’s description of the Revelation at Sinai depart from the Biblical description? How are they similar?
2. Why do you think the midrash compares the revelation experience to the taste of the manna?
3. What does the midrash mean when it says that “each and every person heard [the Revelation] according to his own particular capacity?”
4. What does this text teach us about listening? Why was this individual listening important within the context of the revelation?
5. If the purpose of the Shema is to emphasize God’s oneness, how might that concept be undermined by having a multiplicity of voices? How do you reconcile this?
6. In the last line when the Pesikta states “Know ye that I am He who is one and the same: I am the Lord thy God.” Why is this statement necessary? What is the purpose of “I am the Lord your God”?

CONCLUSION
This class has focused on a variety of different ideas related to the definition of “hearing.” To bring together these ideas and apply them to our recitation of the Shema, the facilitator might want to ask those participating any of the following questions:

- How will participants understand the word, shema/hear, differently in the future?
- After studying these texts, how do participants understand the act of Jews listening?
  - What does it mean to be part of a people that hears and listens?
  - What ideas about hearing and listening are participants taking away?
- Do these words create permission for Jews to experience and hear God in their own ways?
  - What might be the limits to this permission?
- Contrarily, what does it mean for participants to engage in saying the Shema as a community?
  - What are we listening for, and to, together?
“Shema” can be interpreted as hearing, but also it seems to serve as a call to witness. In saying the Shema, what are we witnessing? What does it mean to be a witness?

Shema clearly translates to “Hear.” Yet as it is placed in the sentence, “Hear Israel, the Lord is our God” it seems to mean more than only “hear.” It asks those around to pay attention, to notice, possibly, to witness. Here, we look at how an understanding of witnessing helps to shed light on what the Shema means and upon our responsibilities as witnesses.

For the Facilitator

When the text of the Shema is written in the Torah, the Shema is written with the Ayin at the end of the word “Shema” and the Daled at the end of the last word, “Echad,” made larger, spelling “Ayin-Daled” or the word AyD, which means “witness.” The concept of witness is embedded, then, into the Shema.

In this class, we look at a variety of key questions, including the nature of witnessing as related to the Shema in particular and in Jewish tradition in general. Witnessing has theological as well as this-worldly implications and they are interrelated. Specifically, this class focuses on the central questions and understandings seen below. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

Things to Think About in this Class

- Shema Yisrael is a statement of witnessing as well as affirmation.
- When I say the Shema and act as a witness, I am working together with the Jewish community to witness the unity of God.
- Question: What do I witness when I say the Shema? How do I carry out that responsibility?

The class naturally divides in half. The first three texts each address a fundamental concept, that of God and the Jewish people acting as witnesses for each other. These texts establish that point, with two of the texts commenting on or bringing in the same biblical passage. These texts should serve as a foundation for discussing how the people and God serve as witnesses for each other and how God is both judge and witness.

The second group of texts offers a look at the nature of witnessing in Jewish tradition. These texts should provide an opportunity to discuss what it means to serve as a witness and why these guidelines exist.

From either or both of these conversations, the facilitator should be able to conclude with a conversation among participants about how we serve as witnesses when we recite the Shema. What are we thinking about or feeling when we recite the Shema? What happens when we come together as a community to say these words?
This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend the outlines below.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Ask about the concept of witnessing
- Look at the Baal HaTurim text
- Look at Pesikta deRav Kehana
- Close the conversation by asking about how we might understand the Shema differently under the frame of witness

**LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Ask about the concept of witnessing
- Look at the Baal HaTurim text
- Look at Pesikta deRav Kehana
- Read Yoma 69b
- Close the conversation by asking about how we might understand the Shema differently under the frame of witness

**ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)**
- Ask about the concept of witnessing
- Look at the Baal HaTurim text
- Look at Chagiga 5a
- Look at Pesikta deRav Kehana
- **Break**
- Look at the Ritva commentary on the Talmud
- Read Yoma 69b
- Close with the provided questions and conversation topics

**Introductory Questions and Conversation**

The facilitator might want to begin by asking participants about the concept of witnessing, including any of these questions for discussion:

- What does it mean to witness something? How do we act when we witness something?
- What role do witnesses play in managing/maintaining a healthy society? What about a healthy religious society? Is there a difference in how these are managed or maintained?
- Jewish tradition distinguishes between witnesses who attest to something and witnesses who testify to something. What is the difference? What do they have in common?
- How does being a witness relate to the Shema? Many of us stand when we say the Shema. Why, and how, does this relate to being a witness?
There are many Biblical and Talmudic texts that guide who can be a witness in Jewish tradition (for example: Numbers 35:30, suggesting that a single witness cannot suffice, and Deuteronomy 25:7-10, suggesting that the elders shall serve as a court, in an open trial before the community). In Jewish tradition, witnesses for most legal purposes cannot be women, slaves, minors, “lunatics,” the deaf, the “wicked,” relatives, the “contemptible,” or interested parties. The facilitator may want to raise these ideas as context for the conversation that will follow. Why is this the case?

Text #1: Ba’al HaTurim

This is the first of three texts about the nature of being a witness for God, and about God’s role as witness for the Jewish people. This text establishes the relationship between Shema and witnessing.

The Ba’al HaTurim was a medieval rabbinic leader and commentator who lived in the 12th and 13th centuries in Germany and Spain. His primary work, Arba’ah Turim, was a central halachic guide of its time. His additional works provided commentary on Tanakh, often turning to mysticism and symbolism for ideas, particularly drawing inspiration from gematria and acronyms. This classic idea about the Shema, which plays with letters, is illustrative of the Ba’al HaTurim’s work.

As mentioned before, when the text of the Shema is written in the Torah, the Shema is written as the text outlines below, with the Ayin at the end of the word “Shema” and the Daled at the end of the last word “Echad” made larger, spelling “Ayin-Daled” or the word AyD, which means “witness.” The Ba’al haTurim understands this to offer an idea about God’s being a witness to the Jewish people as well as the people being a witness for God. What does this mean?

[Where the words of the Shema appear in the text of the Torah,] the Hebrew [letters] Ayin (א) and Dalit (ד) are enlarged to form the word “AyD” — רד [witness] and so it says “You are my witnesses [�] says the Lord” (Isaiah 43:10). And so, too, God is a witness to Israel, as it is written “and I will be a swift witness [against those who practice sorcery, who commit adultery, who swear falsely, who cheat laborers of their wages, and who subvert the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, said the Lord of Hosts” (Malachi 3:5).

1. What does Israel testify to through the Shema? What does Israel witness for God?
2. What does God witness for Israel—what does that mean?
3. By defining God’s witnessing in this manner, how does this add another dimension to the Shema?
Text #2: Babylonian Talmud Chagiga 5a

With this—the Ba‘al HaTurim’s quotation of the verse from Malachi as his proof that God is a witness for the Jewish people—as background, it is instructive to see how a passage in the Talmud responds to the severity of God’s statement. This Talmudic passage offers insight into the nature of God’s witnessing of the Jewish people: all sins are equal. This is intense judgment! This text offers an opportunity to look at how God serves as both witness of the Jewish people’s behavior and then subsequently, as judge. The facilitator might use this text to open up a conversation about what it means to be a judge, to balance compassion and punishment, to judge with a heavy or light hand, and so on.

When Rabbi Yochanan would come to this verse, he would cry, “And I will bring you to justice, and I will be a swift witness against those who practice sorcery, who commit adultery, who swear falsely, who cheat laborers of their wages, and who subvert the cause of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, said the Lord of Hosts.” A servant whose master brings him to justice, and bears witness against him, can there be any hope for him? Rabbi Yochanan Ben Zakkai said: Woe to us, for God has measured with equal weight, the lighter sins with the heavier ones!

1. Summarize the text. What seems to be happening here?
2. Why might Yochanan Ben Zakkai have “cried” when we read this verse? Why are the rabbis daunted by this verse?
3. In Jewish law, it is the judge who questions the witnesses, but what happens when witness and judge are one in the same?
4. How does the special relationship between God and Israel make this possible?
5. What do we learn about being a judge from this text? How does a fair judge do his or her work?

Text #3: Pesikta de Rav Kahana 12:6

This text carries one step further the judge/witnessing relationship between God and the Jewish people. In this text, the witness plays a crucial role: Because of the witness’s viewing, the thing that is being witnessed exists, because of the Jewish people, God exists as the Lord. This is a powerful statement about the Shema and about our role as witnesses of God.

“And you are My witnesses, says the Lord, and I am God.” (Isaiah 43:12) Rabbi Shimon ben Yohai taught: “If you are my witnesses,” I am the Lord. And if you are not my witnesses, I am not, as it were, the Lord.

1. According to this midrash, what impact does our witnessing have on God? How does this influence our understanding of what God is?
2. What could have motivated Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai to explain the verse in this way?
3. What does it mean for the concept of witnessing, that God can also witness?
Text #4: Ritva, Babylonian Talmud, Rosh Hashanah 29a

Our exploration of witnessing continues by looking at what witnessing is in Jewish tradition. Here, the Ritva explains a classic text about communal responsibility, emphasizing that communal ties are so strong that Jews are like “one body,” truly interdependent in order to succeed. Moreover, they take responsibility for each other, acting as guarantor. The Ritva, Rabbi Yom Tov ibn Asevilli, was the rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Seville, Spain in the late 13th–14th centuries.

Perhaps it is this fundamental philosophy that drives witnesses in the Jewish tradition to be empathetic. There is possibly a need to give a witness support of a partner, never putting too much pressure or responsibility for condemning someone upon only one witness. Responsibility for another person’s welfare is taken seriously and must be shared.

All Jews are responsible for one another. They are like one body and like a guarantor who repays the debt of a friend.

1. What is the nature of responsibility here?
2. How does this relate to what we say in the Shema, or to how we say the Shema? How does it relate to witnessing?

Text #5: Babylonian Talmud Yoma 69b

The next source demonstrates the extent to which individuals’ relationships with the Divine are impacted not only by who they are and their stage of life but also by historical circumstances. The men of the Great Assembly refuse to allow their historical circumstance to change the way they view the divine—they maintain the same description as Moses did, “restoring the crown” of God’s divine attributes. They quote Moses, essentially, in describing God, agreeing with what Moses witnessed of God. Jeremiah and Daniel, on the other hand, refuse to describe God in ways that they consider not to be truthful, alluding to disasters happening in their times. When their lived experience does not accord with Moses’ words, they will not “ascribe false [things] to him.” Why the difference, and what do we learn about the nature of witnessing?

Rabbi Joshua b. Levi said: Why were they called men of the Great Assembly? Because they restored the crown of the divine attributes to its ancient completeness.

[For] Moses had come and said: The great God, the mighty, and the awesome.

Then Jeremiah came and said: Aliens are destroying His Temple. Where are, then, His awesome deeds? Hence he omitted [the attribute] the “awesome.”

Daniel came and said: Aliens are enslaving his sons. Where are His mighty deeds? Hence he omitted the word “mighty.”
But they [The Members of the Great Assembly] came and said: On the contrary! Therein lie His mighty deeds that He suppresses His wrath, that He extends long-suffering to the wicked. Therein lie His awesome powers: For but for the fear of Him, how could one [single] nation persist among the [many] nations!

But how could [the earlier] Rabbis abolish something established by Moses? Rabbi Eleazar said: Since they knew that the Holy One, blessed be He, insists on truth, they would not ascribe false [things] to God.

1. Summarize the text. What are the different things happening here?
2. What perspectives on witnessing are presented in this text?
3. The first words are those of Moses. But didn’t he see horrible deeds? How can he reconcile the words he uses and what he has seen?
4. Whose reaction do you identify with more: Jeremiah and Daniel or the Men of the Great Assembly?
5. How does this text help us understand the Shema?
6. Have we had similar situations of witnessing, when we were torn between different perspectives?
7. Think about the Shema. Is there anything in the first verse of the Shema that could ever be contradicted in reality? Could God’s oneness ever be considered a false thing?

CONCLUSION

After exploring these texts, the Shema likely has a different, expanded, or more complex meaning for participants. A conclusion to this conversation might be to explore this complexity: What do we say when we recite the Shema? What are we suggesting? What ideas about the relationship between God and the Jewish people are being conveyed in the Shema? What are each of us standing witness to or for?

Remind participants of the Ritva text, which establishes tremendous communal responsibility within Jewish life. Today, we live in a radically individualized world; we tend to bring an individual’s perspective to what we see and do. What does it mean for participants that Jewish tradition sees witnessing as a communal act? What are we signing up for when we volunteer as witnesses by reciting the Shema as a community?
Is the land of Israel central to our Jewish identities? What does it mean if we live there; what does it mean if we live elsewhere? How has the mitzvah of aliyah been understood throughout Jewish intellectual tradition?

When one is in prayer and recites the Shema, it is a simple declaration of Israel's unique relationship with the Creator. But Israel, yisrael, has a dual meaning, referring to the Jewish people and to the land of Israel. Each of these has a special relationship with God and with each other.

This class delves into the relationship between God and the land, the people and the land, the nature of community, and how Jews build community in and outside of Israel. The relationship between the Diaspora and the land of Israel has been a complex one for thousands of years, as evidenced in these texts. This resource gives us an opportunity to share our own understandings of this relationship and even, if we wish, to delve into our decision to live b’galut, in the Diaspora, or b’aretz, in our land.

For the Facilitator

In the 1990s, a Ukrainian woman was asked why, as a Jew, she had moved to Germany in the first place. She replied, “I didn’t move to Germany in the first place. I moved to Germany in the third place; I went first to Moscow, then to Israel, and then to Germany.” Her comment brings to mind the complicated nature of Jewish residency, the interaction of external, economic, and political factors with Jewish settlement, and our historic drive toward the state and land of Israel. Jews have lived throughout the world and have been persecuted throughout the world, but sometimes returned to these same home countries to rebuild Jewish life, while all of our texts, tradition, and God point us to the holy land of Israel. How do we reconcile those ideas?

The texts shared here seem straightforward, but underneath each is a yearning for Israel, a sense of the practicality (for example, simply moving is challenging and not always realistic), and a tension between finding holiness in Israel but also, sometimes, in Babylon or in the Diaspora. That these ideas have been salient to Jews since the beginning of the Diaspora, and the notion that these ideas are real for us and also for generations of Jews before us, should have meaning for those in the room. To the extent that these themes are drawn out from participants throughout the learning and not only at the sum of the class, the conversation will be richer for it.

Central Understandings and Questions

This conversation focuses on the following central understandings and questions:

- Israel as the Jewish homeland has been discussed in Jewish texts in different ways for thousands of years.
- There is not unanimity in Jewish tradition about Jewish settlement in Israel or about the mitzvah of aliyah.
- Israel is seen as a holier place than the Diaspora and as a place of desire, even by those constructing sacred Jewish ideas while based in the Diaspora; at the same time, Babel, or the Diaspora, has seen incredibly vibrant and intellectually substantial Jewish communities.
- Question: Today, how do I understand communal discussion about Israel, aliyah, and the Diaspora?
- Question: What is the relationship between the Diaspora and the State of Israel, or between the Diaspora and aliyah?
- Question: What is our responsibility to build Jewish life in the Diaspora?
This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Hold a brief discussion about living in the Diaspora and Israel
- Look at the Deuteronomy text
- Look at Ketubot 110b
- Close the conversation by asking how we resolve the question of where Jews build Jewish life

**LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Hold a full discussion about living in the Diaspora and Israel
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s essay, What Will Become of the Jewish People?
- Look at the Deuteronomy text
- Look at Midrash Sifre Ekev
- Look at Ketubot 110b and its Tosaphot commentary
- Close the conversation by asking how we resolve the question of where Jews build Jewish life

**ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)**
- Hold a full discussion about living in the Diaspora and Israel
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s essay, What Will Become of the Jewish People?
- Look at the Deuteronomy text
- Look at Midrash Sifre Ekev
- Conclude with a brief conversation about lessons learned and questions
- *Break*
- Look at Ketubot 110b, its Tosaphot commentary, and the related texts
- Close with the provided questions and conversation topics

*Introductory Questions and Conversation*

Facilitators may want to begin this conversation by asking participants if they have been to Israel, and then exploring Israel’s significance to them. For example:

- Participants can share a time when they particularly became close to the physical land of Israel, or they can share what the physical land of Israel means to them.
- Participants can share the ways in which the land of Israel is special to them.
- Participants can also share what it means to them to be part of their local community and their local Jewish community. How do they hold this in productive tension with the Jewish commandment to go “up” to the land, to Israel? Where is Jewish life sacred?

And then:

- When we live in the Diaspora, how do we build a sense of *k’lal yisrael*, of Jewish community and responsibility?
- How does saying the Shema relate to this?
Facilitators may also want to explore living in the Diaspora from a different perspective?

- How do we feel, outside of the land of Israel, when the land is threatened?
- How do we feel when the Jewish people are threatened?
- Are these the same thing?
- What about living in Israel when the Jewish people around the world are threatened? How might this feel?

From within this context, the facilitator can turn to looking at some of what the rabbis thought about these questions.

**Text #1: Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, “What Will Become of the Jewish People?”**

Rabbi Steinsaltz shared this essay in 1995. Here, he issues a sort of call for Diaspora Jews to create a “new way,” a powerful new society in the Diaspora. He does not suggest that Israel should be replaced as the spiritual or cultural homeland of the Jewish people. Rather, he implies that the Diaspora can be such a place as well. Many of us are having this conversation outside of the land of Israel; some of us are inside the land. How do we bring elements of the Diaspora into Israel, or elements of our holy land, eretz hakodesh, into the Diaspora? Are we prepared to recreate Jewish life at its best? Are we doing that now—what would it mean to do that? The full text can be found here: (http://www.steinsaltz.org/learning.php?pg=Contemporary_Issues_-_Essays&articleId=1475).

Now, I want to speak about Jews in the Diaspora. There are basically only two choices. Either we can give up, close shop, and say “we are defeated.” Or, we can create a new way, a new hope. If we want to survive, we cannot do it by simply surviving. There are more Jews, of one description or another, living in the United States than anywhere else. They did, all in all, quite well for themselves. But what they did not do was to create a communal future to look forward to. As individuals, some are very successful, perhaps as successful as Jews were in any other place ever in history. As a community, as a people, they are second raters, third-raters or less. One cannot go on living with the knowledge that you have to be a third-rater forever. It cannot be done. You cannot have a people striving and struggling, fighting and working only for that.

So, if people want to go on—if there is a feeling that there is something in it—if the memory of the half-obiterated document still possesses some compelling power, then Jewish life in this country must be rebuilt. People cannot go on living in the past, even if the past was nice—and it wasn’t completely so. You see, the shtetl, wherever it was, cannot be recreated. There is no need and no use for it.

But—let me just say something full of chutzpah—there is a need, a use and even a possibility of making this place something like Galut Bavel, the ancient Jewish exile in Babylonia. One can create a second center, comparable, sometimes better than the main center in Israel. To do that, one has to do much more than survive. However, if you cannot do it well—if you cannot rebuild here something that will be worthwhile spiritually or intellectually—then it is not worth doing it at all.
1. Summarize the text. What do you think Rabbi Steinsaltz is trying to communicate?
2. How do we bring elements of the Diaspora into Israel, or elements of our holy land, eretz hakodesh, into the Diaspora?
3. Are we prepared to recreate Jewish life at its best? Are we doing that now—what would it mean to do that?

Text #2: Deuteronomy 11:8-14

This text reminds participants of the land of Israel and its richness, of its physical richness, its relationship to God (or God’s relationship with it), and of the Jewish responsibility to the land. It provides a context for conversation that will follow.

8 So you are to keep all the commandments that I command you today, in order that you may have the strength to enter and to take possession of the land that you are crossing into to possess,
9 in order that you may prolong your days on the soil that the Lord swore to your fathers to give them and to their seed, a land flowing with milk and honey.
10 For the land that you are entering to possess: It is not like the land of Egypt, from which you went out, where you sow your seed and water it with your foot like a garden of greens;
11 but the land that you are crossing into to possess is a land of hills and cleft valleys; from the rain of the heavens it drinks water;
12 a land whose welfare the Lord your God seeks. Regularly are the eyes of the Lord your God upon it, from the beginning of the year until the after-part of the year.
13 Now it shall be if you hearken to my commandments that I command you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve God with all your heart and with all your being,
14 I will give forth the rain of your land in its due-time, shooting-rain and later-rain, you shall gather in your grain, your new-wine and your shining-oil...

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What kind of land is promised here? Is this a land that requires little from its inhabitants, or a land that requires much? How do you know?
3. What is the relationship here between God and the land? Why, in your opinion?
4. To what extent does this description resemble the Israel that you know today? Explain.
5. God promised this land to the Israelites. What are the implications of this promise for us, today?
The following midrash exalts the land of Israel in general and the Temple Mount in particular. It would be difficult to imagine any land competing with the grandeur of Israel from this source. Pay special attention to how the Biblical verses are used to prove the uniqueness of Israel. What words are emphasized in each verse?

“...and give you a desirable land, the heritage of the deer, of the hosts of nations.” (Jeremiah 3:19)

[What is … ] “a desirable land”? A land that is made of palaces. It is made of palaces of kings and rulers because any king or government who did not purchase a home in Israel would say, “I have achieved nothing.”

Rabbi Yehuda said, Do we mean to say that all of the thirty one rulers in the past had wedged themselves into the land of Israel? Instead, just like in Rome nowadays, every leader and government who does not have a palace in Rome says “I have achieved nothing” [if I do not have this]. So, too any ruler or government who has not purchased a palace in Israel says, “I have achieved nothing...”.

[What is … ] “the heritage of the deer”? Just as a deer is lighter on its feet then any other domesticated or wild animal, so too, the fruits of Israel come easier than the fruits of other lands.

Another interpretation: Just as when a deer is stripped of its skin it cannot contain its flesh, so, too, the land of Israel cannot contain the abundance of her fruit--when Israel is fulfilling the Torah.

Just as a deer is easiest to eat among all of the animals, so too, the fruits of the land of Israel are easier to eat than those of other lands.

Would they be light or would they be fatty, the Torah says, “a land flowing with milk and honey.” Fat like milk and sweet like honey... The land of Israel because it is the highest of all lands, it is also the most praiseworthy of all lands, as it is written: “Let us ascend and inherit her...” (Numbers 13:30). “And they ascended and they surveyed the land” (Numbers 13:30). “And they ascended to the Negev...” (Genesis 45:25). “And they ascended from Egypt” (Genesis 45:25).
1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What kind of land is promised here? How does it build on the Deuteronomy text?
3. What is Israel, in these rabbis’ or writers’ eyes?
4. Why, do you think, might the rabbis use these physical or animal images to demonstrate the richness of Israel? What is the relationship between the physical and the sacred nature of Israel?
5. How does this understanding of the land of Israel inform the people’s relationship with God?
6. How is the rabbis’ relationship similar to our present-day relationship with Israel? Is it?

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**Text #4: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 110b**

This text, which begins with a comment about marriage and relationship, makes the role of aliya and living in the land clear: If one will not move to Israel, an uncontested divorce, with payment where applicable, is facilitated. It also attributes specific import to living in the land: In the land, we are closer to God and, specifically, we can worship the Jewish God. Outside of the land, this seems not to be the case and even more so, in other lands, we are closer to other gods.

This text should lead to rich conversation about living in Jewish communities outside of Israel (which the text directs against, in comparison to living in Israel). Why is living in a gentile community inside Israel preferable to living in a Jewish community outside of Israel?

*Note that those writing this text were not inside the land! This text, then, may have represented the rabbis’ own yearning.*

The Rabbis taught: He says, “Let us make aliya” and she says, “Let’s not.” We force her to make aliya. And if she refuses, he may divorce her without paying her ketubah. She says, “Let us make aliya.” He says, “Let’s not.” We force him to make aliya, and if he resists, he should divorce her and pay the value of the ketubah. ...The rabbis taught: One should always live in the land of Israel, even in a village where mostly gentiles live. No one should live outside the land, even in a city where mostly Jews live. For anyone who lives in the Land of Israel is like a person who has a God and anyone who lives outside the land is like a person who does not have a God, as it is written “To give you the land of Canaan so that I can be your God” (Leviticus 25: 37).

You mean to say that anyone who doesn’t live in Israel is without God! Rather you must mean that anyone who lives outside the land is like an idolater. Just as the verse says with David, “For God has expelled me today from annexing the inheritance of the Lord, saying to me, ‘Go, and serve other gods.’” Who would ever say to David to go and worship other gods? It must mean, “Anyone who does not live in the Land is tantamount to being an idolater!” (I Samuel 26:19)
1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
   (What is the relationship between the man and the woman?)
2. What claims are made about the Land of Israel which one might find surprising?
3. List all things for which settling the Land of Israel takes priority.
4. The text discusses living in Jewish communities outside of the land and gentile communities inside the land. Which do the rabbis find preferable? Why, do you think?
5. Think about when and where this text, as a text from the Babylonian Talmud, was written. What does the text imply mean for its writers and for Jews everywhere at the time? Why might the rabbis have been thinking about Israel in this way? How does its context influence your understanding of the text?

Text #5: The Commentary of Tosaphot: Ketubot 110B

The Tosaphists, literally “Supplementers,” include a collection of writers and commentators who began their work after Rashi concluded his, around the eleventh century. They include Rashi’s grandchildren and are included in the final redaction of the Talmud that we use today. They typically bring alternative readings of the Talmud based on material found in other Talmudic tractates. To that end, this is a commentary on the Gemara just shared, and it explains why the Talmudic passage stopped being applicable in the twelfth century. First, because it was too dangerous for Jews to travel to Israel. And second, because Jews could not be in the land without conquering it and without taking rule, and Jews were not in a position to do this during this time.

He says, “Let’s make aliyah.” Nowadays we do not observe this commandment because the roads are dangerous. Rabbeinu Chaim says, “There is no commandment to live in the Land of Israel today because there are many commandments connected to the land which, when transgressed, have harsh punishments and we are not capable of observing them carefully.”

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What reasons are given for why the mitzvah of aliyah is not being observed? Would any of these apply today?
3. How is “land” understood here? How is this similar to or different from the texts we’ve read?
4. During this time, the great commentator Nachmanides moved to Israel, and suggested that settlement in Israel even during difficult times was imperative, a mitzvah on behalf of the community, so that a Jewish presence in the land could always be maintained. What do you make of this?
Text #6: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 110B–111A

Look at the following passage, a continuation of the previous Gemara that we read, while being mindful of the verses in the Torah. This text, of course, co-exists with the text that privileges living in Israel. How can this be?

In the first two sections of the text, the rabbis offer ideas about traveling or not traveling to Israel. The text moves to commenting on Song of Songs, and then “three oaths” are listed. These oaths are understood to guide the Israelites’ interactions with non-Jews. Two oaths are sworn of Israel and one is sworn of non-Jews.

The first section of text offers an idea about moving to Israel, or traveling to Israel, from Babylon; the second section comments on the first text, basing its idea on Song of Songs, and the following sections all comment additionally on this piece from Song of Songs. Note that two sections of the text comment on the same line, from two different places, in Song of Songs, specifically lines 2.7 and then 3.5. (Look at each text below to note their similarities and differences.)

The first two oaths are commentaries on these lines; the third oath is a further commentary on Song of Songs 8.4: “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem: Why should ye awaken, or stir up love, until it please?”

To read this text in a group, the facilitator may want to go very slowly, reading and interpreting each piece and noting each piece’s source text, and then even recording the ideas and the source texts on a black/white-board, layering one on top of the other so that themes in the entire text can be pieced apart and understood.

Rabbi Zera was avoiding Rabbi Yehuda when he wished to enter the land of Israel. For Rabbi Yehuda said, “Anyone who goes from Babylon to Israel transgresses a positive commandment, as it is written, “You will be brought to Babylon, and there you will be until the day of My visit to them, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 27:22).

Rabbi Zera interpreted this verse as referring to the Holy Vessels [that the Babylonians plundered from the Temple.] Rabbi Yehuda actually used another verse, “I adjure you, O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you stir not up, nor awake my love, until it please” (Song of Songs 2:7).

Rabbi Zera learned from this verse that the people should not go to Israel en masse. [but one may go as an individual.] Rabbi Yehuda learned that individuals may not ascend to Israel from a different verse. “I adjure you O daughters of Jerusalem, by the gazelles or by the hinds of the field, that you stir not up, nor awake my love, until it please” (Song of Songs 3:5). Rabbi Zera used this verse to learn what Rabbi Yossi Bar Rebbe Hanina learned:

There were three oaths that the Holy One exacted from Israel: One, that the people would not go to Israel [without Divine intervention] en masse. Another, that Israel was made to promise that they would not rebel against the nations of the world and that He made the gentile nations promise not to enslave Israel too harshly... Rabbi Levy said there were six oaths given. The three that have already been stated, and three others. One, they should never reveal the end of days. Another, they should not delay the end of days and they should not reveal the secret to the nations of the world. Why does the verse say “with the hosts and the rams of the field”? Rabbi Elazar said, The Holy One said to Israel, if you fulfill the conditions of the oath, all will be well. If not, I will let your flesh go leaderless into the world like the multitudes and the rams of the field.... Rabbi Yehuda said, Anyone who lives in Babylon is like one who lives in Israel, as it is written: “Ho! Escape, O Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon.” (Zecharia 2:11) Abayye says: We have a tradition that Babylon will not be subject to the sufferings that precede the coming of the Messiah... .
Text #7: Babylonian Talmud Ketubot 111A

It is not lost on those who study the Jewish tradition that the core text of the Jewish canon was developed outside the land of Israel. Everyone acknowledges that the Babylonian Talmud is central to the development of Jewish tradition. How can that fact be reconciled to the sentiment that the Land of Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish people? In fact, the following text addresses this issue. What qualities give Babylonia this unique status? According to these opinions, is this based on the holiness of the land or the merit of the people, and if it is the latter, what does that teach us about the land of Israel itself? Could any center of Torah learning be as holy as Israel, and if that’s the case from where does the Land derive its specific uniqueness, according to these opinions? There aren’t necessarily clear answers to these questions; our hope is that they raise meaningful questions for conversation and challenges to participants.

Rab Judah stated in the name of Samuel: As it is forbidden to leave the Land of Israel for Babylon so it is forbidden to leave Babylon for other countries. Both Rabbah and R. Joseph said: Even from Pumbeditha [a renowned center for Torah learning] to Be Kubi [a village just outside of Pumbeditha].

A man once moved from Pumbeditha to [settle in] Be Kubi and R. Joseph placed him under the ban.

A man once left Pumbeditha to [take up his abode at] Astunia, [also a village near Pumbeditha] and he died. Said Abaye: ‘If this young scholar wanted it, he could still have been alive’.

Rab Judah said: Whoever lives in Babylon is accounted as though he lived in the Land of Israel; for it is said in Scripture, Ho, Zion, escape, you who lives with the daughter of Babylon (Zechariah 2:11).

Abaye stated: We have a tradition that Babel will not witness the sufferings [that will precede the coming] of the Messiah...

1. Summarize the text. What are the ideas being communicated?
2. How can this text be reconciled with the idea that Israel is the spiritual center of the Jewish people?
3. What kind of center is Babylonia, do you think, according to this text? What qualities give Babylonia this status?
4. Is there a modern-day Babylonia? If so, why or how is Israel unique?
CLOSING QUESTIONS AND CONVERSATION

The texts that we have read hold the same tensions about living in Israel or outside of the land that many of us feel today. What does it mean that the rabbis had this same conversation? What do their comments suggest to us about the relationship between the land and God, and what implications does that relationship have for us?

As context, the facilitator may want to research the richness of Babylonia and the Jewish communities there during the first millennium particularly. The yeshivot of Babylonia were some of the most intellectually robust of Jewish society. The academies at Sura and Pumbedita were recognized by Jewish communities and by the larger Muslim state of Babylonia (Iraq) as providing authoritative guidance for Jewish life. More than that, these academies produced the Babylonian Talmud, writing and redacting it, shaping Jewish community for centuries. Rabbis in these academies governed the calendar and set halacha for Jews throughout the Diaspora, creating a uniform way of Jewish living. The academies were filled with students. One could argue that these academies were the high point of Jewish civilization. Yet, they developed outside of the land. How does the mitzvah of aliyah make sense in the context of the richness of Babylonia? What can be accomplished outside of Israel, and what can only be accomplished inside of Israel? (For more information about this era in Jewish history, see jewishencyclopedia.com and look up the article about “academies in Babylonia.”)

Finally, the facilitator may want to return to the question of creating k’lal yisrael, inside and outside of Israel. Having read these texts, how do we create k’lal yisrael when we live outside the land? What role does saying the Shema play in this? What do we call when we proclaim the words of Shema?
How does the Shema connect us as a people, and what is God's relationship with God's people? What does it mean to be one people?

When the Jewish people says the Shema, our voices join together from around the world. We proclaim God’s oneness and our relationship with God, and also as a result, the relationship that we have with each other through our relationship with God.

In this class, we explore the Jewish people's unique bond as a people and how God and the Jewish people have interacted. This is an enormous topic with many engaging threads of discussion and study; we focus here on God's love for the Jewish people and how we fulfill part of our role by building an intimate community. The class offers provoking questions about what holds the Jewish people together and what role we, personally, play in creating Jewish unity.

For the Facilitator

This class primarily focuses on a series of texts that sheds light on the Jewish people's relationship with God. In one text, God demonstrates love for all people as well as for the Jewish people; in another, God shows significant love for the Jewish people alone. A third text ups the ante, with God asking for unity from the Jewish people because of their faith in God’s own unity. A fourth text reminds us that the persecuted, too, are part of our community, and offers another understanding of God’s relationship with the people Israel in addition to love.

These texts each relate to God’s relationship with God's people in their entirety. They beg the question; what is our individual responsibility in the context of this relationship? In the last text, Rabbi Steinsaltz answers that question.

The texts can lead to a rich, powerful conversation about Jewish community, what makes us a holy community, and our responsibilities to that community. Facilitators can help participants reflect on their own experiences of community and Jewish unity, reflecting on the ways in which these experiences might have been sacred, infused with God’s love or infused somehow with God’s presence.

Specifically, the class was designed to focus on the following things to think about. Much of your conversation as a group should center on these ideas, and participants should walk away thinking about, or grappling with, these understandings and questions.

Things to Think About in this Class

Our intellectual tradition includes ideas about both God’s love for God’s entire people and God’s specific love for the Jewish people.

- God favors the beloved and hunts the persecuted; both are part of our tradition and God’s relationship with God’s people.
- Question: What binds the Jewish people together?
- Question: What is our individual role in building Jewish community?
This conversation can be shorter or longer, during one session or two, depending on how much time you have. We recommend following these outlines.

**SHORT (30 MINUTES)**
- Explore initial ideas about community
- Look at Hagiga 3a
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas

**LONGER (60 MINUTES)**
- Explore initial ideas about community
- Look at Avot de Rabbi Natan
- Look at Hagiga 3a
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas
- Conclude with some of the closing questions

**ONE LONG SESSION / TWO SESSIONS (120 MINUTES)**
- Explore initial ideas about community
- Begin with Pirke Avot
- Look at Avot de Rabbi Natan
- **Break**
- Look at Hagiga 3a
- Discuss Leviticus Rabbah
- Look at Rabbi Steinsaltz’s ideas
- Conclude with some of the closing questions

Facilitators may want to use the following essay as an additional resource for this class: http://www.steinsaltz.org/learning.php?pg=Essays&articleId=1476.

**Introductory Questions and Conversation**

To introduce this conversation, the facilitator might ask participants any of the following.

1. What are the ways in which we are one people? What does it mean to be one people?
2. Share a productive experience and a less than productive experience of Jewish community. What does that tell us about the people Israel?
3. What do we already know about God and the people Israel? How do they interact throughout history? What questions do we have about God’s interaction with God’s people?

Exploration of any of these questions will initiate a conversation about what community is and what we imagine to be true about God’s relationship with the Jewish people, allowing participants to open themselves up to learn more from the texts about these topics.
Text #1: Pirkei Avot (Values Of Our Ancestors) 3:14

This text explores the relationship between God and the people of Israel, looking at the relationship through biblical texts. First, Rabbi Avika makes an observation about all people, then makes a similar observation about, specifically, the Jewish people. He sets up an indirect comparison or similarity between all people and Jewish people, suggesting that both are loved. His is a universal message with a particular message for Jews: He suggests that Israel is further beloved because they have the Torah, likely suggesting that Torah is abundant love.

This class opens with this text in order to establish some fundamental principles. First, the rabbis understood God to have a special relationship with the Jewish people, as represented in the Torah. Second, the rabbis understood God also to have love for all people. Third, the Torah was seen as being all encompassing, the blueprint for the world, and therefore the Jewish people, because of their connection to Torah, have a unique role to play. This gives character to the special relationship between God and the Jewish people; through Israel’s living out of the Torah, the world comes to be.

Note that this text doesn’t say anything about Jewish unity. In fact, the text raises questions in its lack of comment on this—does God have a special relationship with each Jewish person or with the people as a whole? What is the responsibility of each of us in fulfilling our people’s relationship with God?

Rabbi Akiva would say: Beloved is the human who was created in the image. Abundant love was made known to him because he was created in the image, as it is written: “In the image of God the human was made.” (Genesis 9:6) Beloved is Israel who were called the children of the Omnipresent. Abundant love was made known to them as children of the Omnipresent, as it is written: “You are the children of the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 14:1) Beloved is Israel for a precious vessel was given to them. Abundant love was made known to them by giving them this precious vessel from which the world was created, as it is written: “For a good lesson I have given you, my Torah, do not abandon it” (Proverbs 4:2).

1. Summarize the text. What is it trying to communicate?
2. What point is Rabbi Akiva making in comparing humanity to Israel?
3. Why do you think two reasons are given for Israel being beloved? Analyze the difference between the two reasons. How do they relate to each other?
4. The claim is made in the third paragraph that the world was created from the Torah. Why does this fact make it more significant that Israel was given the Torah?
5. Is there a connection between Israel being given the Torah and being called “children of the Omnipresent”? What might it be?
6. What does this say about how rabbis of Talmud understood the relationship between God and God’s people?
Text #2: Avot of Rabbi Natan II Chapter 44

This text follows immediately from the prior, as it is a different version of the prior text. Avot of Rabbi Natan/ Avot de Rabbi Natan is a collection of commentary on and a supplement to Pirkei Avot, to Mishnah Avot. These are, to some extent, two versions of Avot whose contents are not identical but are similar. In this version of our text, Israel—rather than the people in general—is beloved, even if they were not told. In this and other ways, the text stresses the special relationship between God and the Jewish people, suggesting that even among the other nations (“children”) of the world, the Jewish people were favored. This text omits “Beloved is the human who was created in the image...” and substitutes “Beloved is Israel...” The emphasis is shifted to the multi-faceted relationship between God and Israel. In this version, humanity is not part of the equation. If we learn the Avot de Rabbi Natan as a commentary on the previous Mishnah, one has to ask the question why has “Beloved is the human...” been omitted.

The facilitator can use this text to discuss how the rabbis understood the uniqueness of the people Israel, why this was a relevant concept at the time and the extent to which it might be a relevant concept today. Why do both of these versions of the text exist? How might this version particularly have helped the people survive?

Note how facile the rabbis are with the Bible, to use Isaiah to comment on Deuteronomy and to intertwine texts in this way.

“Beloved is Israel who was created in the image.” Even if they were not created and they were not told that they were beloved. Abundant love was bestowed upon them that they were called “children of the Ominpresent,” as it is written, “You are children of the Lord your God.” (Deuteronomy 14:1)

Beloved is Israel for they were given a vessel from which the world was created. Even if they were not created and they were not told, they would still be beloved. Abundant love was known to them when they were given the vessel from which the world was created. This was the Torah, as it is written: “I have put My words in your mouth and sheltered you with My hand.” (Isaiah 51:16)

Israel was called [God’s children] as it is written: “You are children to the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 14:1), and the ministering angels were called God’s children, as it is written: “Let the children of God come” (Job 1:6). And it was not known which of them was considered most dear. When however, God said, “Israel is My first born son” (Exodus 4:22) [this meant] You [Israel] are dearer to me than the angels.

1. In many ways this version is a rewrite of the original Pirkei Avot. Imagine reasons for this change, and make a case for the version that you prefer.
2. This passage does, though, have a significant difference even though the material is quite similar. What does this version deny that the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot affirms?
3. In western democracies the notion of being chosen is often under fire. Both the Mishnah in Pirkei Avot and Avot of Rabbi Natan deal with this idea. Does either source reflect your understanding of what it means to be Jewish? If so, which one and why?
Text # 3 Babylonian Talmud Hagiga 3a

This text builds on the special relationship between God and Israel to talk also about the relationship between all Jews. The text creates a clear relationship between the one God and one Jewish people: Because the Jewish people believe in one God, the Jewish people must be one.

The first paragraph explicates a verse from the Book of Jeremiah as being the words of Nebuchadnezer, the king responsible for the destruction of the first Temple and the subsequent exile of Israel. According to this reading, Nebuchadnezer is impressed that when one Jew is pained, all suffer.

The second paragraph unpacks two verses in Deuteronomy. Both of them play on the fact that Israel affirms something about God, and as a consequence of that, God reciprocates. The rabbis fill in the narrative gap by explaining what was affirmed and how it was reciprocal: Here, the rabbis say that Jewish unity exists because one God exists, and because the Jewish people believes in the one God.

As it is written: Israel are like scattered sheep harried by lions. First the King of Assyria devoured them and then Nebuchadnezer of Babylon crunched their bones (Jeremiah 50:17). Nebuchadnezer, the king of Babylon likened Israel to a lamb, just as a lamb when smitten on one limb, feels the pain in all its limbs, so is Israel: When one of them is killed, everyone feels it and everyone suffers...

He further expounded: You have affirmed to God on today…And God has affirmed to you (Deuteronomy 26:17-18). The Holy One said to Israel: You presented me as one to the world [i.e. you have affirmed God], and [for that] I will present you as one to the world [i.e. I will affirm you].

You presented me as one, as it is written: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one!

I will present you as one to the world as it is written: Who is like Your nation Israel, a unique nation in the land.

1. Summarize the text. What is being communicated here?
2. In the first paragraph, Nebuchadnezer observes that the Jewish people is tremendously unified, that when one Jew feels pain, all feel pain. To what extent does this have resonance today?
3. What is the deal that is made? What is exchanged for what?
4. Can you explain how the unity of Israel is reflective of the unity of God? What do we learn about Israel or God by making this parallel? Why does one need the other?
5. Where and why is there such a thing as Jewish unity? How does the theme of Israel feeling the pain of any of its members fit into this understanding?
**Text #4: Leviticus Rabbah 27:4**

In the previous sources, it is declared that Israel has a unique relationship with God because we were given the Torah. The following source speaks about another aspect of God’s relationship with Israel: “And God seeks out the persecuted...”. The persecuted are also part of the community. How does one reconcile the loving relationship between God and Israel with the relationship that is described in the following Midrash? How can both be true? How can the persecuted be beloved, and how can the beloved be persecuted?

“And God seeks the persecuted” (Ecclesiastes 3:15): Rav Huna said in the name of Rav Yosef, God will always seek out the persecuted. When the righteous hunt the righteous, “God seeks the persecuted” [When] the wicked hunt the wicked, “God seeks the persecuted”, and even more so when the wicked hunt the righteous, “God seeks the persecuted,” until one can finally say even when the righteous hunt the wicked, “God seeks the persecuted”.

Rav Yosi Bar Rav Yudan, in the name Rav Yosi bar Nehorai, says, God will always demand the blood of the hunter in favor of the persecuted. Abel was persecuted by Cain, “God seeks the persecuted”—“The Lord paid heed to Abel’s offering” (Genesis 4:4). Noah was persecuted by his generation, and “God seeks the persecuted”—“You and your household come into the ark” (Genesis 7:1). And it is written: “For this to me is like the waters of Noah, as I swore that the waters of Noah would nevermore flood the earth” (Isaiah 54:9). Abraham was persecuted by Nimrod, “God seeks the persecuted”—“You are the Lord God who chose Abraham and extracted him from Ur Kasdim” (Nehemiah 9:7). Isaac was persecuted by Ishmael, “God seeks the persecuted”—“For it is through Isaac that your offspring will continue” (Genesis 21:12). Jacob was persecuted by Esau, “God seeks the persecuted”—“For God chose Jacob as Israel his chosen one” (Psalms 135:4). Moses was persecuted by Pharaoh, “God seeks the persecuted”—“Had not Moses, God’s chosen one, confronted him in the breach...” (Psalms 106:23). David was persecuted by Saul, “God seeks the persecuted”—“And he chose David, his servant” (Psalms 78:70).

And Israel has been persecuted by the other nations. “God seeks the persecuted”—“And in you the Lord chose [you] to be a nation for the Lord” (Deuteronomy 14:2). And even the sacrifices in the Temple follow this principle. The ox is persecuted by the lion, the lamb is persecuted by the wolf, the goat is persecuted by the leopard. This means the Holy One says not to sacrifice from the predators, but from the persecuted. “When an ox, a goat, or a sheep is born...” (Leviticus 22:27).

1. What does it mean that God seeks the persecuted? How would you interpret the Biblical text on which the rabbis are commenting?
2. How do the rabbis seem to understand the original text? Why do they bring so many proof-texts?
3. How do these texts come together? Meaning, how can we understand the loving that God has for God’s people, described in the previous texts, with this persecution? How are both true—how can the persecuted be beloved and the beloved be persecuted? Are the beloved also persecuted?
Text #4: From an Interview with Rabbi Steinsaltz on Elul*

This excerpt from an interview with Rabbi Steinsaltz helps to flesh out how a person of Israel connects with the people of Israel. Rabbi Steinsaltz argues that the community is only as strong as the individuals, and that the individuals must be awake and focused if they comprise a strong community. In other words, individuals have a responsibility to the community, to help it be vibrant, by living vibrant lives themselves.

… What does the individual do within the community? Who is that person? What does he want? What does he do? What can he do? These questions come to structure the community on a different kind of a basis. A community made up of functions is just like a mathematical equation: a set of abstractions. And how can it be made real? When it is made to stand on the real pillars of the community - namely, the individuals.

A Jewish way of putting it is to say that each of the individuals within the community should be a mensch. The month of Elul is the time for making sure that we have not missed the first person singular. We need to know not only how many organizers and how many greater and smaller personalities there are in our community: we should wish to know how many menschen there are there. That is a different way of counting.

The shofar is a very primitive, inarticulate instrument: it is not musical at all. The kind of cry that it emits is the voice of “me,” whoever “me” is, shouting: I am here, I still exist. I may not be of any value, but this primal, coarse voice comes from within me. This sound is the voice that will be recognized after all the words are forgotten. The blowing of the shofar comes to remind people of that most basic, fundamental question: Who are you? What are you going to do? What are you going to do with yourself?

This kind of a cry does not create a community, nor does it create Klal Yisrael. However, it reshapes the community and puts it on a very different basis. Only when a community is made up of a minyan not of twenty legs, but of ten hearts, does it have a good chance of being built in the right way.

1. What is the relationship between individuals and the community in this context?
2. How does Rabbi Steinsaltz understand community?
3. How is the Shema similar to the shofar, in this context? When we say the Shema, how might we be thinking about community and the people Israel?
4. How does this idea about community add to or change your understanding of the texts that we have already read?

CLOSING COMMENTS AND EXERCISES

Discussion of these ideas of Rabbi Steinsaltz will likely lead naturally into a conversation about our Jewish communities today and how they might reflect the ideas in these texts. The facilitator might also want to ask participants how they understand God and God’s relationship with the Jewish people. Will they understand the Shema differently now? Do they understand ideas like chosenness, or God’s relationship with the persecuted, differently now?

*Elul is the month preceding Rosh Hashana.