

# TEFILLAH TIPS

## TEFILLAT SHACHARIT—SHABBAT

### SHEMA YISRAEL

After the recitation of the two blessings preceding *Shema*, we prepare to fulfill the Biblical commandment of reciting the *Shema* each morning. We cover our eyes with our right hand to block out any distractions and demonstrate that G-d is not seeable and say aloud the biblical verse— *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokeynu Hashem Echad* – translated as Hear Oh Israel the Lord is G-d the Lord is One. When reciting the *Shema* we are commanded to accept the *Yoke of Heaven* upon us. Rav Avigdor Miller zt”l writes that the word *Shema* - *to Hear*, is the word that was also used at the moment of the original acceptance of G-d and His Torah at Sinai when the Jewish people cried out “*Naaseh Venishmah - We will do and we will hear*”. As our forefathers declared 3328 years ago, so do we declare today “*Shema Yisrael..*”.

Our sages teach that although *Shema Yisrael* is an actual verse in the Torah Deut 6:4 the first declaration of the *Shema* dates back to when our father Jacob was on his deathbed. In Genesis 49:1 we read that Yaakov summons his children to his bedside to say farewell and reveal the secret destiny of the Jewish people. When he is unable to invoke his divine insights he grows despondent and concerned that perhaps his children (*the original children of Israel*) were not true to the G-d of Israel. At that anxiety filled moment Jacob’s children recited in unison “*Shema Yisrael... Echad*”. This provides comfort and fulfillment to him at the closing moments of life on this earth.

Since then, “*Shema Yisrael*” has become the prayer recited by dying martyrs who died in the name of the G-d. The Talmud relates the painful story of Rabbi Akiva’s death at the hands of the Romans (*Berachot* 61B). As his soul was departing from his body he too recited the *Shema Yisrael*. It is suggested that this is why Jews say *Shema* every night before going to sleep – before reaching a somewhat deathlike unconsciousness, we faithfully recite *Shema*.

The words of the *Shema* are so significant that they fill our *Tefillin* boxes and our *Mezuzot*. We attach the *Shema* to our bodies and our homes to demonstrate our love and commitment to *Hashem* and His Torah. The opening word - *Shema* is written in the Torah with a large *Ayin* and the last word of the phrase *Echad* shows a large *Dalet*. The two letters together spell *Ayd* which means *testimony*. Saying the *Shema* every day in the morning and the evening is a testimony to ones conviction to walk in the ways of G-d.

**Take Home tip:** It is documented that the guards outside the crematoria in Auschwitz knew the words *Shema Yisrael* very well because every day they heard thousands of our ancestors crying *Shema* in their final gasps. Our recital of the *Shema* each day is a living testimony that they did not die in vain, rather to sanctify the name of *Hashem*.

Shabbat Shalom.  
Rabbi Epstein