

The six words of the Sh'ma (Deuteronomy 6:4) form the central affirmation of Jewish faith, and have long been considered a basic focus for Jewish contemplation (*hitbon'nut*) and meditation (*hitbod'dut*). This specific meditation practice is largely inspired by Rabbi Ted Falcon's *Five Steps of the Sh'ma Meditation*, where the Sh'ma becomes a focus that encourages the eventual transcendence of the words themselves.

The Five Steps of the Sh'ma Meditation

1. Create an inner meditative environment

Posture is an important component of the meditative process. Begin sitting comfortably, with your spine straight. Your hands can be placed on your lap, clasped together or with one hand resting in the palm of the other. It is important to begin with a period of relaxation in which an atmosphere conducive to meditation is created. This can be done simply by sitting silently for a few moments, doing some kind of progressive relaxation exercise, following the breath, or any other calming practice. Your belly should be relaxed expanding and contracting freely with your breath. Ultimately, the point is to let go of the body altogether, to notice its itching, its aching and pain without reacting to them, and to return, time and again to your object of meditation. You can meditate with your eyes closed; some prefer to keep their eyes slightly open.

2. Begin silently repeating the six words of the Sh'ma

The six words of the Sh'ma form the basic frame for this meditation. Begin by silently focusing on each word using mindful breathing. As you notice your body inhaling, bring the word "Sh'ma" to your awareness. Then, as you notice your body exhaling bring the word "Israel" to awareness. When the body inhales again: "Adonai;" and when you notice it exhaling: "Eloheinu." Inhaling: "Adonai;" exhaling again: "Echad." Start over again with "Sh'ma" as you notice the body inhaling once more. Visualizing the words can also be helpful for some. When other thoughts intrude, gently return your focus to the repetition of the six words.

שְׁמָא	יִשְׂרָאֵל	אֱלֹהֵינוּ	יְהוָה	יְהוָה	אֱלֹהֵינוּ
SH'MA	YISRAEL	ADONAI	ELOHEINU	ADONAI	ECHAD.

3. Entering into the Heart of the Sh'ma

After 5 to 10 minutes, the meditation deepens as the focus of attention is directed to the central two words of the Sh'ma phrase: *Adonai Eloheinu*. This part of the Sh'ma meditation lasts at least twice as long as the prior period which focused on the entire six words.

אֱלֹהֵינוּ	יְהוָה
ADONAI	ELOHEINU

Silently, these two words are repeated slowly. When other thoughts intrude, gently return awareness to these two words. You might find that focusing on the word *Adonai* when you notice the body inhaling and on *Eloheinu* when you notice the body exhaling can help maintain the slow rhythm of this repetition.

After some practice with this meditation, the silent recitation of the word *Adonai* may be replaced with the visualization of the four Hebrew letters (ה ו ה י *yod – hay – vav – hay*) for which the word *Adonai* is a replacement. Here, again, one might want to start bringing “Yod” to one’s awareness while noticing the body inhaling and so on. This meditative process based on the Sh’ma deepens after practice to transcend both sound and image.

4. Return to the six words of the Sh’ma

After focusing on the Heart of the Sh’ma for 10 to 20 minutes, attention is gently returned to the six-word phrase.

אֶחָד:	יְהוָה	אֱלֹהֵינוּ,	יְהוָה	יְשׁוּאָה,	שֶׁמַּע
SH’MA	YISRAEL	ADONAI	ELOHEINU	ADONAI	ECHAD.

Silently, using mindful breathing, each person repeats these six words slowly to themselves for 5 to 10 minutes. When other thoughts intrude, gently return awareness to this focus.

5. Concluding the Meditation

When you are ready to conclude your meditation session, take a few deep breaths to bridge your meditative state and a more wakeful state of consciousness. Let your eyes open gently and give yourself a few moments before rising. If you are keeping a meditation journal, take some time to record your process.

The Sh’ma

שֶׁמַּע יְשׁוּאָה, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד:

SH’MA YISRAEL, ADONAI ELOHEINU, ADONAI ECHAD.

Listen, Israel: The Eternal manifests as all that is, The Eternal is One.

בְּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְּבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד.

Baruch Shem k’vod mal’chuto l’olam va-ed.

Blessed is the Name in all its expressions, its manifest Presence shines Eternally.

The V’ahavta

וְאַהֲבַת אֵת יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ, וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ. וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים
הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם, עַל-לִבְבְּךָ: וְשָׁנַנְתָּם לְבִנְיָה, וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָּם
בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ, וּבְלִכְתְּךָ בַּדֶּרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ, וּבְקוּמְךָ. וְקָשַׁרְתָּם לְאוֹת עַל-יָדְךָ,
וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ, וְכִתְבֹתָם עַל מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:

Love the Eternal One (YHVH) in all its manifestations, with your whole heart (mind), with your whole soul, and with all your energy. Let these words (of the Sh’ma) which I command you today always be on your heart (mind). Teach (repeat) them to your children, and speak them when you sit in your house, when you walk on your way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. Bind them as a sign upon your hand (let them guide your actions), and let them be as frontlets between your eyes (let them guide your thoughts). And write them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates (let their energies infuse your dwellings).

(Deuteronomy 6:5-9)