

## Love (Sh'mah)



*Sh'mah Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad*

Hear O Israel, Adonai is our God, Adonai is One.

As the mom of three teenagers, I have heard the phrase, “Can you *just* listen!” more than I care to recall. I used to think that I was a decent listener; but these days, it seems as if I can do no right in the listening department. On good days, I’m able to ask, “Do you want me to respond or just listen?” and on not-so-good days, I hear that same refrain, “Can you *just* listen!”

Why is it that I often feel more compelled to talk instead of listen? Maybe because I feel that I have so much that I want to share and impart to my kids before they leave the nest? Maybe I don’t want them to make the same “bad” decisions that I made? Or maybe, could it really be to boost my ego? Sometimes I wonder. Over the years, I’ve come to realize that it is likely a combination of the three, mixed in with some others that have yet to be identified.

When I actually do stop talking and listen, really listen, without an agenda and without anticipating my next remark, something inside me shifts. I notice a spaciousness, a kinder, gentler version of myself. I start to notice the freckles on my daughter’s cheeks and the smile on her face. I pay attention to the expressions on my son’s face and to the pauses in between his words. With those “noticings,” I find that I have more empathy for my teenagers and what they are currently experiencing. Over the years, I’ve learned that much of love is about listening. Listening to the other, listening to myself, listening to the silence, and listening to that still small voice.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>That still small voice that refers to the Divinity within us. The phrase is from I Kings

I've heard the teaching that "God gave us two ears and one mouth, indicating that we should listen twice as much as we speak." Unfortunately, I would bet that the majority of us do just the opposite, speaking twice as much as we listen. It is interesting to note that the first letter in the Shema prayer is the letter shin, ש which seems to be imparting this wisdom, providing us with a visual of our two ears hiding among the three lines, and inviting us to consider how we use them for listening deeply.



Perhaps there is also another hidden message in this shin. Maybe those lines are space holders, inviting us to remain present and hold steady as the rocky child-rearing years unfold.

Shin... Shhhhh... Shema: Hear/Listen.

Look at the spaces between the lines. Listen for the pauses between the words. Hear the silence between the lines. Be present with the presence of the lines. Even before we get to the rest of this prayer, the quintessential Jewish prayer, that mantra of faith, of Oneness, that has been proclaimed throughout millennia, we are reminded to stop and listen.

Shhhh... Shema... When we begin from a place of deep listening in ourselves and in our relationships, we naturally move toward a place of unity and greater understanding.

I've been working on this with my teenagers, and it is not an easy task. Sometimes they feel like talking, but most of the time they don't. As they arrive home from school, I greet them with questions about their day and usually receive one-word answers; a few sentences if I'm lucky.

Despite my frustration, I remind myself: Be present, just listen to whatever it is they are willing to share. As they disappear into their rooms, log on to their computers, and text their friends, I wonder if they will ever emerge from their caves?

Despite my disappointment, I remind myself again and again to be

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19:11-12 : "Come out," He called, "and stand on the mountain before God." And, lo, God passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of God; but God was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but God was not in the earthquake; after the earthquake—fire; but God was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft murmuring sound/a still small voice.

present, and to listen to whatever it is they are willing to share. Most days seem to unfold with a lack of meaningful conversation; and then there are days when I'm preparing dinner in the kitchen and someone wanders in and begins talking. It takes all of my energy *not* to respond. "Stay present and just listen," I tell myself. Making eye contact and nodding my head, I do my best to let them know that they have my attention.

Shin... Shhhh... Shema: Hear/Listen.

I don't always get it right, but I am grateful for what I've learned from that one little letter.

The next time I hear, "Can you just listen!" I will heed my own advice to slow down, listen with both ears, speak half as much as I'd like, and open up my heart to be fully present.

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V-ahahvtah et Adonai elohechah, b-chol l'vahv'chah  
u'v'chol nahfsh'chah, u'v'chol m'odechah.

**Love Adonai your God with all your heart,  
and with all your soul, and with all your might.**

I remember my first week of being a mom with such trepidation and anxiety. As an accomplished professional, I could support myself, cook, clean, and multi-task. I felt pretty sound and grounded in my ability to handle new situations and unforeseen circumstances... and then with the arrival of my first child, my world was rocked. I felt completely deflated and inept. What if I didn't hold him the right way, what if I twisted or moved him too fast, too hard... could I break him? Completely overwhelmed, I literally didn't know which end was up. Thank God, I had been with another dear friend, a year prior, when she was trying to figure out things with her three-day-old daughter. I remember her saying, through her tears, "I am a lawyer, a really competent lawyer, and I can't figure out how to feed my daughter! I think I want to send her back." Now, a year later, I was grateful for having shared that encounter.

After coming home from the hospital, my mother presented me with

a photo album that said, "Happiness is being a mother." I thanked her and then burst into tears, thinking to myself, "maybe for other moms but definitely not for me!" She gently hugged me and told me that it would get easier and that one day I would appreciate being a mother.

And like most things, she was right. A few weeks later, with much work—breastfeeding practice, bathing routines, diaper changes, more sleep, an incredibly supportive husband, and a wonderful community of family and friends, I rocked my little Yossi-pie on my shoulder. Even so many years later, I remember the moment, frozen in time: The sun was streaming in through the window. There was a silence immersed in love so deep, so profound, that I knew the love I was experiencing was coming from my soul, connecting to his, and coming from his soul, connecting to mine. At that moment, I had come to understand what it means to love God with all of your soul.

Fast forward two-and-a-half years: I remember being at an open gym, watching my son as he peeked inside one of the windows of a small plastic play house. Suddenly, another child punched him square in the face—for no reason (unless you count opening the window and looking in as a reason), as I looked on in disbelief. At that moment, a feeling I had never in my life experienced began pulsating throughout my entire body. I felt like a mama bear on the war path, about to rage, "Who dares hurt my baby cub?" It was an unbelievably scary moment, and I felt it strongly—love. A love so deep that I would do whatever I had to in order to protect my young. I quickly whisked my son away and gave him hugs and kisses to make it better. At that moment, I had come to understand what it means to love with all of your might.

Now my son is nineteen; he has grown and experienced much more than I could have imagined when I rocked him in that chair and coddled him in that open gym. He has cultivated his own beliefs, values, and philosophies, which are not always in sync with mine. There have been many times over the years when I have lost my temper and didn't think I had another ounce of patience left inside me. I have had to bite my tongue and let him figure things out on his own, and I have spent many a moment in silent prayer asking for help and guidance on what to do with my obstreperous child. Every time I got the same answer: "Open

you heart just a little bit wider and love him even more.” Not exactly what you want to hear when you really just want to scream. But I accepted this wise inner guidance and did just that. Not always, and not completely successfully, but enough for him to know that I love him unconditionally, with all of my heart.

It has taken me just over a decade to integrate what was written in the *Vahavta* about how we are to love with all of our heart, all of our soul, and all of our might. Not only are we to love God this way, but I believe this same way of loving applies to our children. Despite the challenges that each of us faces with our children, we ultimately have to open our hearts and souls and love them passionately. For when we have experienced this kind of overwhelming, effusive love that connects body, mind, and spirit with our child, we know that it is possible to love God in the same way. As parents, we strive to love our children totally and completely; and as human beings, we strive to love God with the same totality. The love we share with others will flow back into us, enriching us, helping us become more loving parents and more compassionate people. The more we love, the more love comes our way.

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*V'sheenahntahm l'vahnechah,  
v'deebahrtah bahm, b'shivt'chah b'vaytechah,  
u'v'lecht'chah vahderech  
u'v'shochb'chah u'v'koomechah.*

Impress them upon your children.  
Recite them when you stay at home  
and when you are away,  
when you lie down and when you get up.

Valentine's Day 2017 was just around the corner and my daughter was telling me about a video post she had seen of a 10-year-old girl receiving gifts and chocolates from her boyfriend. I wasn't sure why she was sharing, since she is quite selective about what she shares these days. I

remained silent, hoping she would continue talking, and she did, "Can you believe it? She has a boyfriend and she's ten. Well, I know *I* won't be getting anything for Valentine's Day this year."

My heart twinged a bit, feeling her sadness and yet simultaneously grateful that, as a 14-year-old, she did not have a boyfriend.

On February 13, my husband came home from work and surprised both my daughter and me with Godiva chocolates. A rare treat indeed! I was incredibly touched by his thoughtfulness. For the first time, he had bought something for her. I never mentioned the video she had shown me, but it was as if his intuition prompted him to buy her chocolates this year. Knocking on her door, only to receive a "What do you want?!" he kindly responded, "I have something for you, let me know when you can open the door." A few minutes later, she opened her door. In he walked with a golden box in hand. "Thank you so much!" she exclaimed! I knew that she was incredibly touched by his kindness. The next day was February 14. I entered her room to wish her a Happy Valentine's Day with a card and some more chocolates from me. She thanked me, smiled, and said, "Well, I may not have a boyfriend, but I'll always have Dad." Smiling, I responded, "Yes, you will."

As the day progressed, I reflected back upon that moment with deep gratitude on many levels. Grateful that she experienced the thoughtfulness and love of her sweet Dad. Grateful that she was shown how to act toward someone you love. Grateful for knowing the joy of unexpected gifts. The gift of Godiva is one that is extra sweet because of her affinity for this chocolate as a young girl.

My daughter's love for chocolate comes to her honestly, as I am a recovering chocoholic. Not often, but every once in a while, I would splurge and buy myself a couple of Godiva truffles. One day, the golden Godiva box was sitting on my kitchen counter when my then five-year-old, who was learning to read, asked, "Mom, what is that box that says G...G... God..Godv...Godville." Trying my best not to laugh at her and wanting to be sure that I heard her correctly, I asked her to repeat what she said. "Mom, what is in that box that says Godville?" From that day forward, we have called Godiva chocolates *Godville* chocolates. According to my daughter and me, they are **truly** divine!

On the one hand, that funny interpretation is just that—funny; but on the other hand, when I looked deeper, I was happy to see that my daughter could see “God” in a box of chocolates. Having had so many God conversations in our home, this word didn’t seem abnormal to her. Growing up, she did have a lot of “God” talk—when we were at home, when we were out in nature, when she got up in the morning, and when she went to bed. God talk was so common that it just seemed “normal” to find God on a box of chocolates.

*V-sheenahntahm l-vahnechah, v-deebahrtah bahm,  
b-shivot'chah b'vaytechah, oo-v'lecht'chah vahderech  
oo-v-shochb'chah oo-v-koomechah*

Impress them upon your children. Recite them  
when you stay at home and when you are away,  
when you lie down and when you get up.

We read in this prayer that not only are we to love YHVH with all of our heart, mind, and soul, but also, we are to teach our children to do the same, through our speech and our action, at home and away, morning and night. But how do we teach them to love? I'd offer, by simply loving them. We show our children what it means to love YHVH with all of our heart, all of our mind, and all of our soul by loving *them* with all of our **heart**, all of our **mind**, and all of our **soul**.

Some may ask, how does one love on all of those levels—heart, mind, and soul? Jokingly, I respond: Eat some chocolate—it reaches all of those places. A more serious response might include that loving someone with your heart means using your emotional capacity to make them happy. Loving someone with your mind means using your intellect and knowledge to make them happy. Loving someone with your soul means using your “sixth sense” or intuition to make them happy. When we are able to combine all of these levels into an action, into a word, into a gesture, then we are showing our children how we love them fully, which then becomes a reflection of how we are able to love God.

Those Godiva chocolates were a true expression of my husband’s deep

love for our daughter. He used his heart, his mind, and his soul in his choice of what to purchase, when, and why. To some, it may seem like he just bought her a box of chocolates, but I believe that to her that box represented something deeper, perhaps even something she was not able to see yet. Wrapped up in that box of Godville chocolates were God-infused conversations, memories, sweetness, thoughtfulness, and deep, deep love.

### Love: Questions to Consider

- 1) How would you assess your listening ability?  
What might you do to improve it?
- 2) How do you express love for your child?
- 3) Dr. Gary Chapman writes about five love languages. He teaches that each person receives and experiences love most fully in one of five ways: affirmation, physical touch, gifts, acts of service, or quality time.<sup>1</sup> What makes you feel most loved? How about your partner? Your child?

### Ways to Promote Love

- 1) Learn the “love language” of each of your family members (see above).
- 2) Leave love notes for your beloveds in unexpected places (dresser drawers, lunch boxes, purses, wallets, desktops, etc.).
- 3) Listen deeply...without responding immediately.
- 4) Make time each day to spend at least a few minutes alone with your child.

<sup>1</sup> Chapman, Gary D. *The 5 Love Languages: The Secret to Love that Lasts*. Illinois: Northfield Publishing, 1992.