



Shema: Love

Script References

Introduction

For thousands of years, every morning and evening Jewish people have prayed these well-known words as a way of expressing their devotion to God, they're called the Shema.

"Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the Lord is one, and as for you, you shall love the LORD your God with all of your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."¹

We're going to look at the third key word in this prayer: Israel is called to "love" their God. But what does that mean?

Ahavah

"Love" is a very common word in most languages, as it is in ancient Hebrew (pronounced *ahavah*), and it most basically refers to the affection or care one person shows another. It sometimes describes physical affection, like the king of Persia's "love" for Queen Esther² but there are other Hebrew words that more specifically refer to physical desire or sex (the words for that are *dodim* or *'agab*). *Ahavah* is more broad. So Abraham had *ahavah* for his son Isaac³—that's parental love.⁴ Jonathan showed *ahavah* for his friend David, that would be brotherly love.⁵ In fact, a whole group of people can have *ahavah* for their leader, like when the Israelites showed love for their king, David.⁶ *Ahavah* can even describe loyalty between political allies, like Hiram, the king of Tyre "loved" David, they had good relations, and so Hiram wanted to help David's son Solomon build the temple.⁷

These are all different kinds of affection, described with the one word *ahavah*.

Now all of this is helpful for understanding God's *ahavah* in the Old Testament.

00:00–00:28

1. Deuteronomy 6:4-5

00:29–01:27

2. Esther 2:17

3. Genesis 22:2

4. 2 Samuel 19:6

5. 1 Samuel 18:1

6. 1 Samuel 18:16

7. 1 Kings 5:1

God's Ahavah

01:28–02:30

So in Deuteronomy, Moses told the Israelites: "God showed affection for you, He chose you ... because of his *ahavah* for you."⁸ So God doesn't love them because they earned it or deserve it, it simply originates from God's own character. He loves because he loves. This is why Jeremiah can say that God's love is "everlasting."⁹ It has no end, because it has no beginning. God's love just is, an eternal fact of the universe.

8. Deuteronomy 7:7-8

9. Jeremiah 31:3

And God's love is not a duty, it is a genuine feeling, an affection that God experiences. This is why the prophet Hosea compares God's love for his people to a husband's *ahavah* for his wife,¹⁰ or to a parent showing *ahavah* for their child.¹¹ It's one of the strongest things God feels.

10. Hosea 3:1

11. Hosea 11:1

But that doesn't mean that God's love is just a feeling: God's love is also an action—it's something God chooses to do. Like when Moses says, "because of his *ahavah* for your ancestors, he brought you out of Egypt with great power."¹² God's love isn't just a sentiment, it is something God *does*.

12. Deuteronomy 4:37

Ahavah is an Action

02:31–03:47

And so, in the *Shema* Israel is called to respond to God's *ahavah* by showing *ahavah* in return ("you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart"). And just like God's love, human love should show itself through actions. Like in Deuteronomy 10:12-13, "What does the LORD your God ask of you, except to fear the Lord your God, to walk in his ways, to love him and serve him ... and to keep his commands." All of these actions are centered around love. If I'm not doing them, I don't actually love God. I just say I do.

Which leads to one last thing, in the Old Testament, I show my love for God by how I treat the people around me. In Deuteronomy 10:18-19, we read that "God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and he shows *ahavah* for the immigrants among you, giving them food and clothing. And so you also show *ahavah* for the immigrant."

So the people are to imitate God's *ahavah*, by showing *ahavah* for others. This is the idea underneath the famous line: "you shall *love* your neighbor as yourself."¹³

13. Leviticus 19:18

And so at the end of the day, all of this is rooted in God's own eternal *ahavah*. Like we read in the New Testament letter of 1 John 4:19, "We love, because God first loved us."

And that's the Hebrew word *ahavah*.