

# Study Guide to *The Shema*, by Norman Lamm

Prepared by Rabbi Dr. Stanley M. Wagner

## Session I (Chapters 1 – 3, Pages 3 – 21)

### Questions

- ❖ What thoughts flow through your mind when you reflect on the words *Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokaynu Hashem Echad*?
- ❖ Let's discuss Dr. Lamm's definition of "spirituality" (page 6): "The intention we bring to our religious acts, the focusing of our mind and thoughts on the transcendent...a groping for the Source of all existence and the Giver of Torah." What would you add or subtract from that definition? Why?
- ❖ How do we attempt to achieve balance in our own lives between "spirituality" and commitment to Jewish "law?" Dr. Lamm suggests (page 6) that "spirituality" is "subjective" and Jewish law is "objective." However, in our lives is there not a great measure of "subjectivity" in our relationship with Jewish "law," at least in terms of our selectivity ---
  - Which laws will we take very seriously, or somewhat seriously; how we allow certain "laws" to impact on our lives?
- ❖ If "we do not have the capacity for sustained attention (in prayer) for even one short paragraph" (page 10), how can we at all engage honestly in the enterprise of prayer?
- ❖ "What was heard at Sinai was not a one time affair; the voice of God is ubiquitous and continuous. It is up to us to hear it." (Page 14).
  - Just how do we go about hearing that voice? How do we go about "understanding" that voice (page 15)? What role does *kavanah* play in this process?
- ❖ What is the difference between a "doubter" and an "honest doubter"?
  - It is too much to ask to "put our doubts aside" even for one "sacred moment" and "stand before our Maker as children?" Can we "doubt our doubts" with integrity? (Page 17)
- ❖ The recitation of the *Shema* helps integrate the individual into "the whole community of Israel." (Page 19) Discuss the importance of that effort and other Jewish mechanisms for accomplishing that purpose.
  - How important is "community" in our personal and individualistic search for "spirituality?"
- ❖ How does Judaism, in its entirety, or in its parts, help us to cope with and to overcome confusion and despair "in an age of cynicism, confusion and despair?" (page 21)

## Session II (Chapters 4 – 7, Pages 23 – 57)

### Questions

- ❖ Dr. Lamm discusses some of God’s attributes as reflected in our tradition---God, as manifesting Mercy, God as meting out justice; God as seen in nature; God, as experienced in history; God, as universal; God as having a particular relationship with Israel.
  - How do these attributes correspond to God’s “Oneness?”
  - In what way does the Christian concept of “Trinity” differ substantively from the Jewish view of God’s multiple attributes?
  - Can we reconcile the “chosenness of Israel” and God’s unique relationship with the Jewish people with our belief in a universal God, who is the Ruler of the universe and parent of all humankind?
  - If God is truly unknowable, how can we say anything meaningful about God?
  - How can we relate to Him at all?
- ❖ The designation of God as “Lord” (or Master) implies that we are all “servants” in God’s kingdom. It proclaims “our spiritual dignity,” and provides us with an entitlement to human freedom. (Pages 29-30)
  - What biblical mandates can you discuss which address other “human rights” issues? Let’s discuss the hope that humankind will embrace these principles as an eschatological doctrine, that is, it will happen at the “end of days,” or in Messianic times, versus the belief that we are required, here and now, to bring God’s “Kingdom of Heaven” to earth. (Chapter 5-6)
- ❖ The exclusivist interpretation of *echad*, (pages 44-45) that is, He alone is God, and is entitled to all of our love and obedience presents an existential dilemma for modern man. While we certainly eschew idolatry today in the biblical sense, the idolatry of the heart that propels us to establish priorities, embrace ideals, engage in activities which belie our loyalty to God, is everywhere evident.
  - What “weapons” are there in the Jewish “arsenal” that aid in establishing appropriate priorities, and assist us in combating modern day idolatry?
  - How do we reconcile “obedience” with “freedom” to choose?
- ❖ How did you feel about your encounter with the Kabbalistic interpretations of “the Lord is One?” (Pages 47-57) Were you overwhelmed, confused, or elevated?
  - What opportunities are offered by Jewish mysticism to achieve personal spirituality?
  - Where, on the rung of the ladder of our spiritual pursuits, does it belong?
  - Can Judaism be compartmentalized into Philosophy, Theology, Mysticism, Law, Ethics and Morality, Spirituality?

## Session III (Chapters 8 – 14, Pages 59 -112)

### Questions

- ❖ Chapter 8 provides an intriguing analysis of theories related to the unity of God and the unity of the universe. It also provides us with guidance on how to extrapolate from those philosophically controversial ways of repairing our own “fractured” and “fragmented” lives, as well as the polarized world. How so?
- ❖ Note (on page 70) that, in discussing “the interloping verse” (*Baruch Shem...*), Dr. Lamm records that we sanctify God’s name when we proclaim “faith in God’s holiness in public prayer,” and not only “by an act of martyrdom, and not only by exemplary moral conduct.”
  - How do you understand the biblical mandate to “sanctify the Divine name?”
  - What do these acts do for us spiritually and for the community?
  - Does this principle provide us with a compelling reason to engage in public worship, rather than private worship?
- ❖ On pages 77-78, we find a Midrash which links the love of God with the requirement to “make Him beloved of others,” even as Abraham and Sarah proselytized in order to convert pagans to monotheism. There are those who find in this Midrash the mandate for a Beth Din (religious court) to accept righteous candidates for conversion who wish to join the Jewish people.
  - Should Jews actively engage in proselytization?
  - Why were non-Jews discouraged from joining the fold?
  - What is a “**righteous** convert?”
- ❖ Let us discuss “love” of God in contradistinction to “fear” of God (pages 70-87). While we can understand the commandment to “fear” God, can we be commanded to “love?”
  - Why do people feel uneasy about “fear” and comfortable with “love,” even though both emotions are meant to propel us to embrace behavioral changes in our lives?
  - How do we continually kindle the “flame” of love of God in a manner which will make it responsible for “behavior modification” in our lives?
  - How do we sustain the feeling of “awe” of God and make it a spiritual force in our lives?
- ❖ How do you relate to the Maharal’s understanding of love of God, that is, by loving Torah scholars (page 94)?
  - But aren’t rabbis human after all?
  - How do we “participate in spirituality” by cleaving to God and loving God?

- ❖ The Italian thinker, Samuel David Luzzatto, takes Saadiah, Maimonides and Mendelssohn to task (chapter 14) for being too rationalistic and elitist in their understanding of love of God. He also cautions against interpreting Torah through other intellectual prisms. Rather, love God “lovingly by obeying His commandments.”
  - Do you concur with Dr. Lamm’s criticism of Luzzatto?
  - How do we go about synthesizing secular wisdom with Torah? Isn’t that a dangerous enterprise?

## Session IV (Chapters 15-17; pages 113-169)

### Questions

- ❖ Dr. Lamm’s response to the query “Does God need our love?” (Chapter 15) guides us to understand and embrace God’s “Otherness,” while at the same time enables us, existentially, to relate to Him.
  - Does it work for the Kaddish (page 118)?
  - How about for the analogy of the Italian Rabbi, de Modena (pages 123-124)?
  - How do you feel about anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms? Do they help us relate, or do they debase our perception of God?
- ❖ Discuss the conflicting “urges” within us, the *yetser hatov* and the *yetser ha’ra* (pages 129-135). How do you understand these “forces” and how do they work?
  - Do you think that the human being is essentially “good,” or “evil?”
  - Left to his/her own devices, without any external law governing his/her behavior, or social restraints, or threat of punishment, how would most human beings behave?
- ❖ We do not find a definition of “soul” in Dr. Lamm’s work. He uses it as a synonym for “life” (pages 135-140). How would you define it?
  - How does it function?
  - Can we cultivate the “soul” to achieve a greater spirituality?
  - How do we tap into it?
- ❖ Loving God with our “might,” according to one interpretation, means with “money,” that is, through charity (pages 141-145). Is giving charity not more of a reflection of our love of mankind?
  - Is charity not simply a reflection of our own human compassionate spirit? Or, is not giving charity a command?
  - Do “law” and “spirituality” merge in this act?

- ❖ The second interpretation of “might” suggests that we have to love God even when life goes awry, when we have been assaulted by misfortune. Think of the Holocaust.
  - How is it possible to muster the spiritual energy to love God in the face of such an immense tragedy?
  - What about the less dramatic, but personally devastating tragedies that are part of the human experience?
  - Has Dr. Lamm made a convincing case for “love?”
  - What has the Book of Job to offer as guidance for us as we encounter life’s turbulences?
- ❖ In the final chapter (chapter 17), we learn of the quintessential significance of **faith** if the words of God are to be “upon” and within our hearts.
  - What kind of “leap of faith” is necessary for us to embrace Torah?
  - What role does “reason” play, and how do “reason” and “faith” interact, in establishing our Jewish commitments?
  - Where do we find the time, given our hectic lives, to study Torah meaningfully enough for it to make a difference?
  - Tefillin and Mezuzah are ritual objects. Do we need ritual to embrace a spiritual life?

---

Rabbi Stanley M. Wagner has served the Denver community for more than three decades and is Rabbi Emeritus of the BMH-BJ Congregation, Chaplain Emeritus of the Colorado State Senate, Professor Emeritus at the University of Denver, Founding Director and Director Emeritus of the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Denver, and Founding Director and Director Emeritus of the Mizel Museum of Judaica. He has written and edited four books: *A Piece of My Mind*, *Great Confrontations in Jewish History*, *Traditions of the American Jew*, and *Great Schisms in Jewish History*, published by KTAV. He is the general editor of a six-volume series on *Christian and Jewish Traditions in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Dr. Wagner is currently co-authoring a five-volume work, *Understanding the Bible Text: Onkelos on the Pentateuch*, to be published by Gefen Publishing Company, Jerusalem/New York.