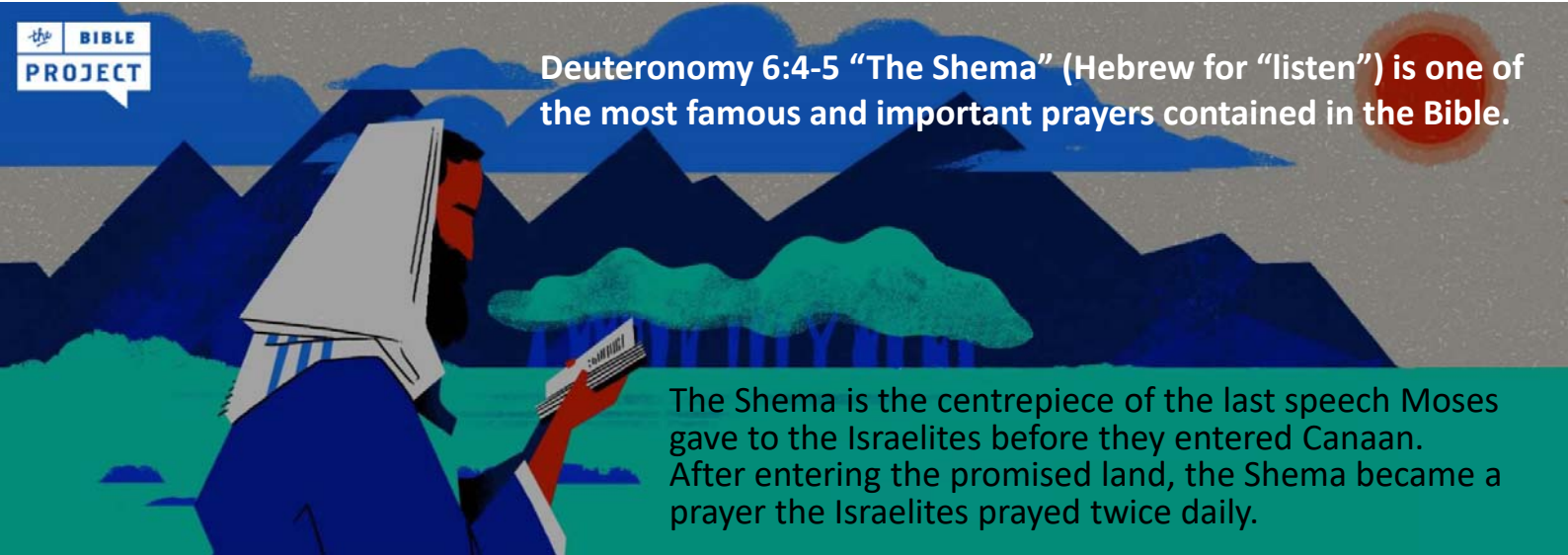


Deuteronomy 6:4-5 "The Shema" (Hebrew for "listen") is one of the most famous and important prayers contained in the Bible.



The Shema is the centrepiece of the last speech Moses gave to the Israelites before they entered Canaan. After entering the promised land, the Shema became a prayer the Israelites prayed twice daily.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one, and as for you, you shall Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."



The prayer begins with the word "Shema" (listen), a Hebrew word full of meaning. Shema is often translated to hear or listen, but it's more than just sound waves entering your ear.

Biblically, to Shema means to listen and obey. Listening and doing are two sides of the same coin. It's about giving respect to the one speaking to you and doing what they say. In that sense, real listening takes effort and action.



LORD is the next keyword in the Shema. It's written in all caps because it's the personal name of God, YHWH (pronounced yah-we). The first instance of God using this name is with Moses at the burning bush.

But over the years, to protect the sanctity of God's name, the Jews stopped speaking it out loud when reading the scriptures. This practice led to further obfuscation of God's name, which is why, in English Bibles, it is written LORD and not YHWH.



The third keyword in the Shema is love, or in Hebrew, "Ahavah." At its most basic level, it means to have affection toward someone. But biblically speaking, love is more than sentiment—it is also action.

In the Shema, Israel is supposed to respond to God's love by showing love to him in return. And just like God's love, human love is to show itself through action. We show our love for God by how we treat the people around us.



The heart, or "Lev" in Hebrew, is the fourth keyword in the Shema. Different cultures have different concepts of the heart, what it is and does, and the biblical authors are no exception.

The Israelites had a broad understanding of heart. They saw it as the organ that gives physical life and the place where you make sense of the world, where you feel emotions and make choices. In the Shema, God's people are called to devote their whole body, mind, and feelings and desires, as well as their future and failures, to God.



The fifth keyword in the Shema is "Nephesh," or soul. The English word refers to a non-material essence of a human that survives after death, but that concept would be entirely foreign to the Old Testament authors.

Biblically, people don't have a soul; they are a soul (or "Nephesh")—a living, breathing, physical being. In the Shema, to love the Lord with your soul is to offer your entire being, with all its capabilities and limitations, in an effort to love God and to love your neighbour as yourself.



The final keyword in the Shema is strength, or "Me'od." This is the only place in the Bible where "Me'od" is translated as strength. Elsewhere it means "very" or "much." It is used to intensify the meanings of other words.

While it may sound funny, to love God with all your strength ("Me'od") is to love him with all your "Muchness." It means to love God with everything you have, devoting every possibility, opportunity, and capacity to honour God and to love your neighbour as yourself.

