



LOIS TVERBERG

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WALKING  
*in the*  
DUST *of* RABBI  
JESUS

HOW THE JEWISH WORDS *of*  
JESUS CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE

## Wisdom for the Walk

1. Reflect on your own cultural and spiritual heritage. How may it have distorted your view of Jesus and his teachings? In what ways do you feel it portrays Jesus accurately?
2. Why have we lost an understanding of the Hebrew culture and context of Jesus? How might those things still affect our thinking today?
3. Read John 7, keeping in mind that Jesus' followers as well as his opponents were all Jews, and often the words "the Jews" refers to Jewish leaders who opposed him. How does that cast light on your reading?
4. The chapter points out the contrast between the maturity of the Jewish believers in Acts and the Gentile believers of Corinth, who were plagued with sins and scandals. Consider your own life and the life of your church. Do you exhibit signs of maturity, or do you have a long way to go, like the Corinthians? How can you and your church pursue spiritual maturity?
5. How does understanding Jesus' culture help us to better interpret and live out his words?

## Shema: Living Out What You Hear

The word *Shema* itself means "listen," and the recital of the Shema is a supreme act of faith-as-listening: to the voice that brought the universe into being, created us in love and guides us through our lives.

—Rabbi Jonathan Sacks<sup>1</sup>

In 1945, Rabbi Eliezer Silver headed up the search for thousands of displaced Jewish children across Europe. They had been hidden from the clutches of the Nazis on farms and in convents and monasteries, and now he sought to return them to their families if at all possible.

The rabbi had a promising lead with a report that a monastery in southern France had taken in Jewish children. But the priest in charge was of little help, declaring that to his knowledge, all of their children were Christians. And Rabbi Silver could produce no records.

Schwartz . . . Kaufmann . . . Schneider. These family names were obviously German, but they could be either Jewish or Gentile. He scanned their small faces—many had lived there since they were toddlers. How could he know if any of them were from Jewish families?

He asked if he could visit the wards. In front of the children he began singing in Hebrew, "*Shema Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad.*" ("Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one.") A handful of faces lit up, and tiny voices from around the room joined in. They recognized these ancient words from their bedtime prayers and from their earliest memories of their mothers and fathers reciting them each morning and evening during their own prayers.<sup>2</sup>

These six words begin the *Shema* (pronounced "shmah"), three sec-



tions of Scripture repeated twice daily to remind each Jewish person of his or her commitment to God (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41; see pages 195–96 for the text). For thousands of years, observant Jewish parents have taught their children the words of the *Shema* as soon as they could speak. Jesus likely learned it on Joseph's knee when he was a youngster too. These same lines have been central to Jewish prayer life since centuries before Jesus was born.<sup>3</sup>

Before I started learning about Jesus' Jewish context, I, like most Christians, had never even heard of the *Shema*. But it was so central to Jesus' own faith that when a lawyer asked him what he believed was the greatest commandment, his answer began by quoting from the *Shema*:

One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28–31)

Like many Christians, if you asked me to summarize this famous story, I'd rattle off Jesus' words about loving God and neighbor. But I'd skip over this mysterious preamble about God being "one," the very words that those Jewish children knew by heart. The line I had never heard of was the cornerstone of their faith.

Why did Jesus quote this line about the Lord being one? Because it is the opening line of the *Shema*. Immediately following it is the great command: "Love the Lord your God with all of your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." Every morning and evening for thousands of years, the Jewish people have promised to love God wholeheartedly when they've said the *Shema*.

Believe it or not, Jesus' next command, "love your neighbor as yourself," comes straight from Leviticus 19:18. I used to think that the

scribe's question was a legalistic quiz and that Jesus' talk of love rather than law would have shocked and scandalized his audience. Imagine my surprise to discover that every word of Jesus' answer came straight out of the *Torah*—from Leviticus and Deuteronomy—the Old Testament two books I had read the least.

The lawyer's query was not foolish either. Rather, it was an invitation to participate in a fascinating debate among the rabbinic teachers of his day. Most likely his words were: *Mah klal gadol ba'torah?* What is the great essence of God's Law? What overriding principle encapsulates all of God's instruction? (*Torah*, which we translate "law," actually means "teaching." Technically, the term "Torah" only refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, what Christians call the Pentateuch. But often the word is used to refer to the Scriptures as a whole.) The goal of answering this classic question was not to summarize the Bible in one's own words, but to choose one key verse that distilled all the rest, focusing its light down to a single brilliant point. Jesus was being asked to give his opinion on an intriguing discussion that sought to get at the very heart of God's will.<sup>4</sup>

When we hear the lawyer's question in light of its Jewish context, we can see how profound it was. And Jesus' answer is all the more penetrating when we meditate on it in its original setting too. Let's begin to uncover some of the richness of God's greatest command by examining this first line of the *Shema*, which has been so central in Jewish thought for many centuries. In later chapters, we'll examine the rest of Jesus' words.

### *Shema*—Hear and Obey

The Hebrew words that Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy overflow with great wisdom. Looking more closely, this is how the first line of the *Shema* is translated:

*Shema* (Hear)  
Israel,  
Adonai (the Lord)  
elohenu (our God)

Adonai (the Lord)  
 echad! (one/alone)

The first word, *shema*, we usually translate “hear.” But the word *shema* has a much wider, deeper meaning than “to perceive sound.” It encompasses a whole spectrum of ideas that includes listening, taking heed, and responding with action to what one has heard.

I discovered the wideness of the word *shema* in my first Hebrew class. One classmate had a smattering of Hebrew knowledge gleaned from other places, and he let us all know it. He'd come late, leave early, and goof around during class. The teacher would pose a question to someone else, and he'd blurt out the answer before they could respond. Annoyed, one classmate pointedly inquired, “How do you tell someone to *obey*?”

“*Shema*,” responded my instructor.

Later that afternoon, curiosity prodded me to search for verses that contained “obey” in my computer Bible program. In almost every case, the Hebrew behind “obey” was *shema*!

For instance, in English we read Deuteronomy 11:13 as, “So if you faithfully *obey* the commands I am giving you today. . . .” Literally, though, this verse reads, “And it will be if *hearing*, you will *hear*. . . .” And after Moses recited the covenant to the people of Israel, they responded, “We will do everything the LORD has said; we will *obey*” (Exodus 24:7). But the Hebrew here actually reads, “All that God had said we will *do* and we will *hear*.” The two verbs here are really synonymous—to hear is to do, to be obedient.

This became even clearer one sticky summer evening when I was visiting an old college friend. As we chatted together in her front yard, we could hear squealing and laughter coming from behind her house. Her kids were drenching each other in a water fight, a duel between the garden hose and a big squirt gun. As the sun sank below the horizon, it was getting past their bedtimes, so we paused our conversation so that she could call them inside. “It’s getting late—time to go in,” she announced. But the giggling and chasing didn’t even slow down. She repeated her command, louder and louder. No effect.

“My kids seem to have a hearing problem, Lois,” she sighed, wearily.

Since I knew that she had studied some Hebrew, I commented, “You know, actually, what I think your kids have is a *shema*-ing problem.” Her words were vibrating their eardrums, but not actually moving their bodies toward the door to her house. She could have been talking in Klingon for all their response. She knew as well as I did that the natural outcome of listening *should* be response.

Grasping the wider meaning of *shema* yields insights to other biblical mysteries. In the psalms, David pleads, “O Lord, please *hear* my prayer.” But he wasn’t accusing God of being deaf or disinterested. Rather, he was calling on God to take action, not just listen to his words. When the angel appeared to Zechariah to announce that his wife Elizabeth was pregnant with John, he declared that their prayer had been *heard*—that God was answering the barren couple’s prayerful longings to have a child (Luke 1:13).

How does this help us unlock the words of the *Shema*? In this line, it is saying in effect, “Hearken, take heed, Israel—the LORD is your God.” Often God uses *shema* to call the Israelites to obey him, to trust him, and to follow in his ways. You can hear God saying this very thing in Psalm 81. Listen to it in light of the wider meaning of the word *shema*:

Hear me, my people, and I will warn you—  
 if you would only *listen* to me, Israel! . . .  
 But my people would not *listen* to me;  
 Israel would not submit to me.  
 So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts  
 to follow their own devices.  
 If my people would only *listen* to me,  
 if Israel would only follow my ways,  
 how quickly would I subdue their enemies  
 and turn my hand against their foes! . . .  
 You would be fed with the finest of wheat;  
 with honey from the rock I would satisfy you.  
 (Psalm 81:8, 11–14, 16, italics added)

one” in the sense that God is unique. There is only one God, the God of Israel. So this line is usually understood as a statement of belief in monotheism.

The word *echad* has been a sticking point between Jews and Christians. Often Jews point to the fact that it means “one” as a reason that they cannot believe in the Trinity or in the deity of Christ. And Christians respond that *echad* can refer to a compound unity, as when God created morning and evening, and together they made *yom echad* (“one day”) (cf. Genesis 1:5). Or when Adam and Eve, through marriage, became *basar echad* (“one flesh”) (Genesis 2:24).

This whole debate hinges on interpreting the *Shema* as a creed; that is, “the LORD is one” is a statement about what kind of being God is. But, interestingly, one of the most widely-read Jewish Bible translations now renders Deuteronomy 6:4 as “The LORD is our God, the LORD *alone*” rather than “The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*.”<sup>10</sup> It does so because in recent decades, scholars have come to believe that the original, ancient sense of *echad* in this verse was more likely to be “alone” than “one.” In Zechariah 14:9, for instance, *echad* has this sense: “The LORD will be king over all the earth; on that day the LORD will be *echad* and his name *echad*” (pers. trans.). This is a vision of the messianic age, when all of humanity will cease to worship idols and revere *only* God and call on his name *alone*.

Jewish scholar Jeffrey Tigay asserts that even though the Scriptures clearly preach monotheism, the *Shema* itself is not a statement of belief. It’s an oath of loyalty. He calls the first line of the *Shema* “a description of the proper relationship between YHVH and Israel: He alone is Israel’s God. This is not a declaration of monotheism, meaning that there is only one God. . . . Though other peoples worship various beings and things they consider divine, Israel is to recognize YHVH alone.”<sup>11</sup>

Why is this important? Because it changes the sense of what the *Shema* communicates. Rather than merely being a command to a particular belief about God, it is actually a call for a person’s absolute allegiance to God. God *alone* is the one we should worship; him only shall we serve. As often as the *Shema* is called a creed or a prayer, it

### *Echad*—The One and Only

The other key word in the first line of the *Shema* is *echad* (ech-HAHD). Its most common meaning is simply “one,” but it can also encompass related ideas, like being single, alone, unique, or unified. The multiple shades of meaning of *echad* and the difficult wording of the rest of the line have made the *Shema* a topic of debate for millennia.

Part of the problem is that Deuteronomy 6:4 doesn’t even have verbs. It literally reads: “YHWH . . . our God . . . YHWH . . . one.”<sup>9</sup> The verse can be read either as saying “The LORD is our God, the LORD alone,” or “The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” Of these two readings, the more common reading is the second, that “the LORD is

is better understood as an oath of allegiance, a twice-daily recommitment to the covenant with the God of Israel.

As Western Christians we are used to reciting creeds and statements of belief in order to define our faith. We expect to find one here too. So we easily could misunderstand that Jesus was saying that it is extremely critical that we believe in God's "oneness." But when properly understood, this line shows that the greatest commandment is actually a call to commit ourselves to the one true God.

Reading the line this way solves another mystery about what Jesus was saying. If he was asked what the greatest commandment was, why does he begin by quoting a line about God being "one"? Because if you read this line as about committing oneself to God as one's Lord, it flows directly into the next line in the *Shema*, explaining *why* we should love God with every fiber of our being. If the Lord *alone* is our God, and we worship no other gods, we can love him with all of our heart and soul and strength. The two sentences together become one commandment, the greatest in fact—to love the Lord your God.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, in the light of their Hebrew context, we find that Jesus' words call us beyond what is going on in our brains. We are not just to "hear" but to take heed, to respond, to obey. And we are not just called to believe in the oneness of God, but to place him at the center of our lives.

To do that, we are to love God with all of our heart and soul and strength and mind. Each of these words, in their Hebrew context, can expand our understanding of our calling and the very essence of the Scriptures, as Jesus understood it. We'll consider that next.

## Loving God with Everything You've Got

Be as strong as the leopard, swift as the eagle,  
fleet as the gazelle and brave as the lion  
to do the will of your Father in heaven.

—Judah ben Tema<sup>1</sup>

In the bitterly cold predawn, icy winds sliced through Viktor Frankl's threadbare uniform. Yet another eternally long day was beginning for him and his fellow inmates as they wearily marched through the gates of Auschwitz to the day's work site. Trudging through puddles and slush down a stony, gutted road, the group clustered together to keep warm.

From behind an upturned collar, a man next to him whispered, "If our wives could see us now! I do hope that they are better off in their camps and don't know what is happening to us." Thoughts of his own wife suddenly flooded into Frankl's mind. In his mind's eye, he could see her with uncanny clarity—her warm smile, her frank but encouraging nod, the way her eyes squinted when she laughed. A powerful wave of love for her overwhelmed him, carrying him away from his bleak, hopeless reality. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Frankl writes:

I understood how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. . . . For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory."<sup>2</sup>

In his darkest hour, love for his wife filled him with such joy that

he grasped why the angels could spend all of eternity in worshipful love of God. For a few moments, Frankl glimpsed the essence of the greatest commandment, "Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:5).

As Christians who have understood Christ's sacrifice for us, we have no problem understanding why loving God with all our hearts is our appropriate response. But what does this second line of the *Shema* really mean, in terms of your heart, your soul, and your strength? What should it look like in our lives?

### How Do You Command Love?

This first word Jesus quoted is *ve'ahavta* (veh-a-hav-TAH)—literally, "and you shall love." It is understood to be a command, even though it sounds as if it is a statement about the future. In some sense, you could read it as describing the future. When we finally stand before Christ and see what he accomplished on our behalf, we really *will* love the Lord our God with all of our hearts. Just like the angels, we'll find nothing difficult about worshiping God for eternity.<sup>3</sup> This is what heaven really is—dwelling forever in the presence of our beloved Savior.

But the plainer sense of *ve'ahavta* is not about the future, but a command for today. In the Middle Ages, the famous Jewish philosopher Maimonides wrote:

What is the love of God that is appropriate? It is to love God with an exceedingly strong love until one's soul is tied to the love of God. One should be . . . like a person who is "lovesick," whose thoughts cannot turn from his love for a particular woman. He is preoccupied with her at all times, whether he is sitting or standing, whether he is eating or drinking. Even more intense should the love of God be in the hearts of those who love him, possessing them always as we are commanded "with all your heart and with all your soul" (Deuteronomy 6:5).<sup>4</sup>

Maimonides was basing this sermon on a line that comes a little later in the *Shema*, that the hearers are to think about God's words when

they're sitting at home or walking along the road, when they lie down and when they awake (Deuteronomy 6:7).

Rabbi Jeffrey Spitzer connects the idea of God being *echad*, the only one, with being in love. He writes:

When one falls in love, this is what it is like. The object of one's love is all there is; the love and the relationship create a complete unity of experience. A person in love wants to shout out "Do you hear! I am in love! This is the one!" That's not too far from "Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" When one falls in love, one wants to learn everything about that person ("and you shall speak of them"), the conversations last all day and even through the night ("when you lie down and when you rise up").<sup>5</sup>

As wonderful as this passion for God might be, love is more than the tingling high a person gets from swaying to an hour of praise songs. Pastor Brian McLaren points out that some "spiritual infatuation addicts" wander from church to church, looking for just the right combination of a tear-evoking message and heart-swelling music to float away in a spiritual euphoria. Certainly God's presence is real, and it can be quite palpable. But for some, the worshipful ecstasy of "The Feeling" becomes all that matters. Responding to the message or joining the church community is simply not on their agenda.

"Sometimes I wonder if too many of us assume that 'The Feeling' is the whole point of worship—worse, that it's the whole point of Christianity," McLaren comments. He imagines God as asking, "If you never felt 'The Feeling' again, would you keep worshiping me anyway—for me, and not just for the feeling?"<sup>6</sup>

Knowing more about the wideness of the Hebrew word for love, *ahavah* (a-hah-VAH), can shed light on what the command to love God is really about. Besides the common understanding of love as affection toward another, *ahavah* goes beyond emotions. It is like *shema* in that it can also describe actions associated with love, not just an inward mental state. *Ahavah* can also mean "to act lovingly toward" or "to be loyal to." You see this in ancient treaties, when an enemy king who signed a covenant would pledge to "love" the king

with whom he was making peace. This meant that the enemy king would act loyally, not that he would have warm thoughts about what a great guy the other king was every time he came to mind.

This nuance of *ahavah* solves another puzzle. How could God order people to "love" him in the sense of having a certain emotional response toward him? Actually, he didn't. When the Israelites were commanded to love God as part of their covenant, we can read it as not so much about passionate feelings as much as an utter commitment to loyalty toward God, the one they obeyed.

As Pastor Chuck Warnock puts it:

Love meant action. Love meant living a certain way, a way that distinguished God's people from all other people. Loving God meant worshipping the One, True God—not hedging your bet by making idols to the sun god, and the moon god, and the god of the harvest, and worshipping those, too. No, loving God meant throwing your lot in with the One God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>7</sup>

It's not that emotions weren't important. But emotions came afterward, when God's people experienced his generous care, his mercy for their sinfulness, and his answers to prayer. King David's passionate love for God made him burst into undignified dancing, tossing aside his robes and regal etiquette in worshipful joy (2 Samuel 6:14–16).

This full-bodied definition of the word "love" also teaches us that loving others must include action, not just mental feelings. We cannot fully obey God's command to love our neighbors by just thinking nice things about them. To love them encompasses getting up off our chair and showing them God's love by helping them in any way that we can.

I often tell my sweet little black tuxedo cat Daniel how much I love him, which seems to be a special kindness in light of his chronic health issues and odd appearance. A year ago a food allergy made him itch, so he licked off all his fur from his chest to his tail. His front looked fine, but his back half was naked and

*Be a disciple of Aaron:  
love peace and pursue it,  
love your neighbors,  
and attract them to Torah.*

—Mishnah, Avot 1:12



wrinkly, like a sphinx cat. We finally solved the itch but even now his fur is only partially restored, so he still is half bald.

It struck me one day that all the warm inner thoughts I had toward Daniel weren't really love if they didn't cause me to organize my life around giving him his meds every morning and evening, clean up after his unending litter-box mess, and dole out money each month to the vet. Love is *both* inward and outward, both the warm fuzzies and the actions that result from them.

When we understand the active side of love, *ahavah* can shed light on Jesus' words. When he commanded us to love our enemies, he may have been thinking more about our actions toward them than our inner affections. If you read his words this way, the phrase that you should "love your enemies" becomes synonymous with the next phrase, "do good to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27). You *live out* love toward your enemies by treating them fairly, praying for them, not taking revenge, and being kind no matter how unkind they are to you. When someone acts cruelly toward you, you don't need to deceive yourself into thinking that he or she is really a wonderful person. But if you do your best to act with love, your feelings are bound to change over time.

### With All Your Heart

In English, we speak of the "heart" to refer to our emotions, sometimes even contrasting our "hearts" with our "heads," our rational thinking. But in Hebrew, the heart (*lev* or *levav*) doesn't just describe your emotions; it also refers to your mind and thoughts as well. It is the center of all your inner life. With a primitive grasp of physiology, it's not hard to see how the Israelites came to this conclusion. Many ancient cultures assumed that the heart is the seat of intelligence because it is the only moving organ in the body, and strong emotions cause the heartbeat to race. And when the heart stops beating, a person is dead.

Knowing that the word "heart" often meant "mind" or "thoughts" can clarify some Bible passages. For instance: "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts" (Deuteronomy

6:6) really means "These commandments are to be a part of all your *thoughts*." And Proverbs 16:23, "The heart of the wise instructs his mouth and adds persuasiveness to his lips" (NASB) really means, "The wise person thinks through his words, so that he can speak persuasively." Whenever you read "heart" in the Old Testament, consider it in terms of the intellect as well as the emotions, because in Hebrew it can also refer to your mind.

This means that we are also to use all of our *thoughts* as well as our emotions to love the Lord. As Paul says, "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). If there is one thing we can learn from Jewish culture over the ages, it is an utter passion for learning one's religious faith. A rabbi of Jesus' day would have been expected to draw insight from his memory of the entire written Torah and the rest of the Scriptures and to possess an encyclopedic memory of oral commentary. Jesus held his own with the best, earning their respect as a result of years of learning in his childhood and adult life.

Even today, Orthodox rabbis memorize vast amounts of commentary texts. One scholar gave his twenty-volume Talmud to a student because he didn't need it anymore.

Like others, he'd repeat its tractates by the hour to keep them fresh in his mind. Because he was a professor at Hebrew University, strangers recognized him on the streets of Jerusalem for his prolific knowledge and would buttonhole him to get his opinion on a difficult text.<sup>8</sup>

When I first heard about this kind of memorization, I didn't think it was humanly possible. But then I started noticing all the pop culture we know by memory. Test yourself by turning on an oldies radio station. See if you can't rattle off verse after verse of hundreds of songs you haven't heard in years. If you're of my generation, it's "Monday, Monday, can't trust that day . . ." and "Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away . . ." I bet if you just heard the words, "Here's the story of a lovely lady . . ." you could sing the rest of the

*Just as the goad directs  
the heifer along its  
furrow to bring forth  
life to the world,  
so the words of the  
Torah direct those who  
study them from the  
paths of death to the  
paths of life.  
—Talmud, Hagigah 3a*

*Brady Bunch* theme song. How about *Gilligan's Island*? Our brains are filled with sitcoms and top forty hits, whereas people of Jesus' time filled their minds with psalms and Scripture and prayers, which were often chanted or sung.

You might think that an education that revolved around memorizing the Bible is excessive, but in most societies from ancient times up to the present, people have been far more literate in their sacred texts than we are today. Indeed, our modern Western culture is one of the most secular in the history of the world.<sup>9</sup>

### With All Your Life

We tend to read right past the phrase about loving God with "all your soul." In our culture, saying you love something with your "heart and soul" means that you love it with your spirit and emotions, and very passionately. But what we read as "soul" (*nephesh*—NEH-fesh) also has a different sense in Hebrew than just one's spirit or inner being. *Nephesh* means *life* as well, as long as you have breath. So the Jewish interpretation of this line is that you are to love the Lord with *all of your life*, meaning with every moment throughout your life. Loving God with all of your life is the exact opposite of our culture's expectation that you'll wedge a few moments for God in between work, hobbies, sports, TV, and the latest movie.

Loving God with all your *nephesh*, your life, also means that you're even willing to sacrifice your life for him. If Jews are able, they will quote the *Shema* at their death to make a final commitment to their God. Many a Jewish martyr has exclaimed the *Shema* with his last breath as a testimony to that fact.

A powerful story is told about Rabbi Akiva, who lived in the first century AD and who was tortured to death publicly by the Romans for teaching the Torah. It was the time of saying the morning *Shema*. During the torture, his students heard him reciting the *Shema* instead of crying out in pain. His students called out to him, "Teacher, even now?"

The dying rabbi explained, "All my life I have wondered about the phrase that says 'Love the Lord your God with all of your soul,' won-

dering if I would ever have the privilege of doing this. Now that the chance has come to me, shall I not grasp it with joy?" He repeated the words of the *Shema*, "Hear O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone," until his soul left him.<sup>10</sup>

This is what Jesus was calling us to do and what he did himself: he loved the Lord (and us) with all of his life, until he breathed his last.

3:31-32).

*Hesed* is to love as God loves. When God's presence passed by Moses on Mount Sinai and revealed his very essence, God proclaimed his great *hesed* (Exodus 34:6). Biblical scholar John Oswalt describes it this way:

The word *hesed* . . . [is] the descriptor par excellence of God in the Old Testament. The word speaks of a completely undeserved kindness and generosity done by a person who is in a position of power. This was the Israelites' experience of God. He revealed himself to them when they were not looking for him, and he kept his covenant with them long after their persistent breaking of it . . . Unlike humans, this deity was not fickle, undependable, self-serving, and grasping. Instead he was faithful, true, upright, and generous—always.<sup>11</sup>

Like other Hebrew words, *hesed* is not just a feeling but an action. It intervenes on behalf of loved ones and comes to their rescue. After Abraham's servant miraculously found a wife for Isaac by bumping into her at a well, he praised God "who has not abandoned his kindness [*hesed*] and faithfulness to my master" (Genesis 24:27). Because *hesed* is often active, it is translated as "mercy" or "loving-kindness," but neither of these words fully conveys that *hesed* acts out of unswerving loyalty even to the most undeserving.

*Hesed* is a bone-weary father who drives through the night to bail his drug-addicted son out of jail. *Hesed* is a mom who spends day after thankless day spoon-feeding and wiping up after a disabled child. *Hesed* is an unsung pastor's wife whose long-suffering, tearful prayers keep her exhausted husband from falling apart at the seams. *Hesed* is love that can be counted on, decade after decade. It's not about the thrill of romance, but the security of faithfulness.

My parents celebrated their sixty-third wedding anniversary before my father died two years ago. I was born last of seven, after they had been married twenty-some years. The love I saw between them was not newlywed passion but a calm commitment to travel through life's highs and lows together. They were hardly unusual in their generation, but the gift they gave their children is getting rarer every day—a sense that our lives were stably anchored in a loving family. By weathering life's storms together, year after year, they embodied God's *hesed*.

I wonder if *hesed* is becoming harder for people to grasp nowadays. To us, love is dating and romance—a candle-lit restaurant and a sunset walk along the beach. We focus on love in the short term. Our movies tell us that a housewife who dumps her balding, boring husband for a shadowy stranger with a passionate kiss has discovered true love. Is this because lifelong loyalty is becoming so rare? As more and more of us grow up in broken families, are we losing our ability to imagine love that never ends?

More and more, Christians even talk about our relationship with God as a romance. We reminisce about the day we accepted Christ, fondly remembering the night we first met. Does that mean that we're only dating and not married? On my crabby, grumpy days, God's *hesed*

## With All Your Very?

Imagine that next Valentine's Day you open your mailbox to discover a fancy, romantic card. And inside, your beloved has written only one line:

*I love you with all of my very.*

With all your *very*? What kind of sentiment is that? Why would a person buy a card with such an odd typo? But this strange phrase is actually the last line of the commandment to love God. Love the Lord with all of your heart, and all of your soul, and all of your *very*. Hebrew speakers find the phrase as strange as we do. You can almost hear the crowd of puzzled Israelites murmuring when they first heard Moses' words: "With all my very? . . . Very *what*?"

The word, *me'od* (meh-ODE), "very," is a common adverb that is used the same way as we use "very," to intensify adjectives. Outside of the *Shema*, it's almost never used as a noun.<sup>12</sup> You'll likely find it on the first page of your handy Berlitz phrase book. A common first line (to a man) is "*Mah shlomkha?*" ("How are you?"), and the usual response is, "*Tov me'od*" (TOVE meh-ODE, "very well"). And in Genesis 1:31, when God looks back on all his handiwork, he proclaims his creation not just *tov*, "good"—but *tov me'od*, "very good."

Hebrew scholar Randall Buth reads the *Shema's* phrase "with all of your very" as saying, "with all of your *oomph!*" The word itself pushes you to love God heartily, earnestly, zealously—or as we read it, with all of your *might*.

Once English speakers hear *me'od* defined as "strength" or "might," we see the issue as solved and move right on. But remember that the wording, actually, is "all of your *very*." Every time Hebrew speakers uttered the strange phrase, it provoked them to meditate on what this odd construction was really saying.

You can find several discussions in the first-century writings about what your "very" really means. As you'd expect, one way of interpreting

it was as “all of your much-ness” in the sense of “strength.” But interestingly, another interpretation was that it means all of your *mind*—your thoughts, consciousness, and intelligence. (This meaning is also inherent in “all your heart,” but preachers also associated it with “all your very.”) Sometimes the word’s vagueness prompted expositors to explain *me’od* with two meanings, side by side, and expand the *Shema* from three parts to four.

More than one scholar believes that this is the reason why Jesus’ version of the *Shema* in some gospel texts has four aspects rather than three, as in Deuteronomy.<sup>13</sup> In Mark 12:30 it has four components: heart, soul, mind, and strength. In Matthew 22:37 it has only three: heart, soul, and mind. But in Matthew, “mind” takes the place of “strength.”<sup>14</sup> (Luke 10:27 has four components, like Mark’s version, but a lawyer quotes it rather than Jesus.)

So what did Jesus actually say? Simple, if he was talking about Scripture. He didn’t speak the Greek words that we see in the Gospels. He quoted the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy. But when the gospel writers interpreted his words for their audiences, they explained the strange word *me’od* the way they understood it, as “mind” and/or “strength.” Since the word *me’od* is ambiguous, sometimes they even gave it two explanations, as other teachers did, so that the greatest commandment became fourfold instead of three.

Believe it or not, they had yet another explanation of *me’od* that can also teach us today. Your *me’od* is also about your *mammon*, your money. This is because “all your very” can be understood to mean “all your increase.” Everything God has given you over your lifetime has “increased” you. Your wealth and possessions, your family and children—all are gracious gifts from him. Loving God with everything you have is a high calling indeed.

How do you love God with your money? Obviously, one way is by sharing with those in need, and both Jesus and Jewish tradition expected that we would do so—more about that later. But you could also look at loving God with your money in terms of financial integrity. Moneywise, discipleship has a “cost,” even in the smallest decision you make. When you show a sales clerk that she undercharged you on an item, you’ll get a little less change back. As you tally up

your tax return, if you decide to not exaggerate a deduction, a few dollars will come off your refund. If your business forgoes a questionable opportunity, your bottom line will decline. And if you dent another car as you’re parking and leave a note rather than driving away, it might cost you *a lot*. Rather than gritting your teeth at each of these little “expenses,” you could see them as ways of saying “I love you” to a righteous God.

### A Modern Shema

Rereading the text that Jesus considered the very essence of God’s Word, we can capture it in this modern way:

“Listen up, Israel—The LORD is your God, he, and he alone!! You should love him with every thought that you think, live every hour of every day for him, be willing to sacrifice your life for him. Love him with every penny in your wallet and everything that you’ve got!”

Or if you want to say it in Hebrew,<sup>15</sup>

*Shema Israel, Adonai elohenu, Adonai echad!*  
*Ve'ahavta et Adonai elohekha*  
*b'khol levavkha,*  
*uv khol nafshekha,*  
*uv khol me'odekha!*