



# Shema as a Six-Word Story

Topic: *Shema* as a six-word story

Ages: 4<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> grade

## Materials:

- Whiteboard and whiteboard markers
- Handout: Six-word Memoirs
- Handout: Writing a Six-Word Story
- Handout: Themes of the *Shema* and its Blessings
- Pens/pencils, one per student
- Lined or printer paper, at least three pages per student
- *Siddurim*, at least one per pair
- Colored markers (preferably thin)
- Masking tape
- Chart paper

## Prepare in Advance:

- Print the following student worksheets (located in the *Shema* - Support Materials download)
  - Six-word Memoirs, one per pair
  - Writing a Six-Word Story, one per student
  - Themes of the *Shema* and its Blessings, one per student
- Find the following prayers in the siddur and note the page where they are located. Be prepared to write these page numbers on the white board in Step 6.
  - שְׁמַע *Shema*
  - יוֹצֵר אֹר *Yotzer Or* (recited before the *Shema* in the morning)
  - אַהַבָּה רַבָּה *Ahava Rabbah* (recited before the *Shema* in the morning)
  - עֲזַרְתָּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ *Ezrat Avoteinu* (recited after the *Shema* in the morning)
  - מַעֲרִיב עֶרְבִים *Ma'ariv Aravim* (recited before the *Shema* in the evening)
  - אַהַבַת עוֹלָם *Ahavat Olam* (recited before the *Shema* in the evening)
  - אֱמֶת וְאֱמוּנָה *Emet ve'Emunah* (recited after the *Shema* in the evening)
  - הַשְׁכִּיבֵנוּ *Hashkiveinu* (recited after the *Shema* in the evening)

## Background for Teachers:

The *Shema* is considered the closest to a statement of faith that Judaism has. With only six words, it impactfully and pithily reflects a relationship between the Jewish people and God that is enduring and everlasting.

However, the six words of the *Shema* (twelve if you also include *בָּרוּךְ שֵׁם כְבוֹד מַלְכוּתוֹ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד* *Baruch Shem kevod Malchuto l'olam va'ed*, which is traditionally recited in an undertone after the *Shema* is said aloud) is part of a longer series of blessings that are recited before and after the



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*Shema*. These blessings address other important themes in Judaism, including the importance of the relationship between God and the people Israel, Torah as a sign of the connection between God and the Jewish people, and a belief in the people Israel's past and future redemption.

Traditional themes of the *Shema* and its blessings:

**יּוֹצֵר אֹר** *Yotzer Or* (recited before the *Shema* in the morning) and **מַעְרִיב עֶרְבִים** *Ma'ariv Aravim* (recited before the *Shema* in the evening)

Light, darkness, angels, creation, power, responsibility, regular changes in time and season are a comfort.

**אֶהְיֶה** *Ahava Rabbah* (recited before the *Shema* in the morning) and **אֶהְבֶּת עוֹלָם** *Ahavat Olam* (recited before the *Shema* in the evening)

God shows love by giving Torah; we want to be taught as our ancestors; Torah study is central to our lives; we want to gather the entire Jewish people in a place of unity; God loves Israel.

**עֲזַרְתָּ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ** *Ezrat Avoteinu* (recited after the *Shema* in the morning) and **אֱמֶת וְאֵמוּנָה** *Emet ve'Emunah* (recited after the *Shema* in the evening)

Redemption from Israel in the past, and hope for redemption in the future. God is faithful, we can depend on God every day. God's past actions give us hope for the future. God is perfect, but also close and approachable. Truth—affirmation of God—becomes central rather than love as before.

**הַשְׁכִּיבֵנוּ** *Hashkiveinu* (recited after the *Shema* in the evening)

God redeems us; we are evaluating our evenings and hoping for God's protection for the future.

### Description of Activities

Overview: Students will consider why brief statements hold such deep power. They will then review the *Shema* and its blessings to identify the themes of the blessings. To help them find their own connection to these larger themes, they will write their own six-word stories that reflect their own personal relationship to God and/or Judaism.

#### Step 1

Explain:

- There is a story told that when once asked to write a full story in six words, the novelist Ernest Hemingway responded:

Write on the whiteboard: "For Sale: baby shoes, never worn."

Ask students for their interpretation of the meaning of the story.

Explain:

- In 2006, *Smith Magazine* invited writers to write their life stories in exactly six words.
- Since then, nearly 1 million short stories have been shared there, at [www.sixwordmemoirs.com](http://www.sixwordmemoirs.com), and in many books published by Smith Magazine and that other organizations have taken their lead.

Pair students. Distribute a copy of the handout, Six-word Memoirs, to each pair. Have students read the stories silently. Afterwards, ask for 2-3 volunteers to read aloud their favorite to the group.



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### Step 2

Ask:

- What was it like reading these 6-word stories? How did it feel?
- How do you think it might have felt differently if you had read a 2-page essay instead of six words about the same idea?
- Why do you think these stories are powerful even though they are only 6 words? (Limits force you to be creative; they make you consider the best words in the best order for your message; short is easier to remember – hence bumper stickers, slogans, etc.; short can be memorized).

### Step 3

Distribute to a blank flashcard and a pen/pencil to each student.

Ask them to write a 6-word story of their own. Possible prompts include stories about:

- Their day
- A favorite thing
- Their hopes for the future

### Step 4

Explain:

- Judaism has a famous 6-word story too.

Distribute a *siddur* to each pair and indicate that they should open to the page to find *Shema*. Count the words with the students. Read each word and define it, using the translation of the *Siddur* to assist.

Ask:

- What do we observe about these words and their order?

If students do not come up with the following, note that in the six words of the *Shema*:

- 3 words are used that all mean “God” (“*Adonai*” and “*Eloheinu*”)
- 2 words (“*Adonai*”) are repeated
- The second person (“*Shema*”—to “you”) and the third person (“*Eloheinu*”) are both used

Ask:

- If you only have six words, then using a word twice and using a synonym for that same word must mean something! What do you think this repetition says about the *Shema*?
- Why does the *Shema* work?
- How does it make you feel and why?

Read together the line after *Shema*, “*Baruch Shem Kevod.*” Count the words.

Ask:

- Even if this is a coincidence that it’s also 6 words, why do you think that it being a short statement is important?



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### Step 5

Explain:

- The *Shema* is traditionally recited as part of prayer services twice a day, once in the morning and once in the evening.
- When we say the “*Shema*,” however, we don’t just mean the 6 (or 12) words that we just reviewed.
- Rather, we refer to those 12 words, as well as longer sets of blessings that come before and after the *Shema*.
- Imagine the 12 words of the *Shema* as sandwiched between longer sets of blessings.
- The rabbis call this section of prayer “*Shema u’virkoteha*” – *Shema* and its blessings.

### Step 6

Explain:

- To explore some of the themes of the *Shema* and its blessings, we are to read these blessings for their main themes and then write words or draw images that you think summarize each blessing.

Using the page numbers provided for them in the *siddur*, students will review the blessings and write words or draw images in the appropriate box on Handout: Themes of the *Shema* and its blessings.

### Step 7

Explain:

- Now that we have identified the big ideas of the *Shema*, we are each going to write our own six-word story about either the themes of the *Shema* and its blessings. If students struggle with this, you can suggest they write about their personal relationship to Judaism or God.

You can use the themes that you identified in the Handout: Themes of the *Shema* and its Blessings, or themes in your own hearts and minds.

Distribute Handout: Writing a six-word story, paper and pens/pencils to each student. Each student will follow the instructions on how to write a six-word story, with the teacher keeping track of time.

### Step 8

When students have completed writing their first draft of their six-word story, they will share it with a partner for feedback.

Students will then revise their six-word story and rewrite it. They can also illustrate it if time allows.

Post the six-word stories in the classroom and/or share with the community online.