

## שְׁמָע (SHEMA) AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF FAITH CURRICULUM FOR CHILDREN'S SPIRITUAL FORMATION

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper explores the transformative potential of the Shema, a foundational Jewish prayer, in shaping children's spiritual formation and development within a multi-generational context. The Shema, emphasizing monotheism, love for God, and internalization of faith, serves as a potent springboard for the intergenerational transmission of faith and values. By examining how the Shema can be meaningfully incorporated into family practices, rituals, and storytelling, the paper argues that it provides children with a framework for developing a strong identity: The Shema instills a sense of belonging to a tradition and fosters a deep connection to a higher power. Also, the Shema's emphasis on loving God and neighbor equips children with ethical guidelines for navigating life's complexities. The paper draws upon contemporary scholarship on intergenerational faith transmission, child development, and the richness of Jewish tradition to offer practical strategies for families to utilize the Shema as a catalyst for nurturing children's spiritual growth. The paper, therefore, concludes that by embracing Shema's timeless wisdom and fostering intergenerational connection, families can empower children to embrace their faith with conviction and purpose. Therefore, the Shema as a principle for intergenerational faith transmission unto contemporary

parents/guardians is recommended to build a faith foundation, create engaging experiences, encourage discussion and exploration, and maintain continuity.

**Keywords:** *Shema, Intergeneration, Monotheism, Transmission, Child Development, Spiritual Formation, Curriculum.*

## **Introduction**

The Bible is the most significant book for Christian faith transmission from generation to generation. The Bible then becomes a significant curriculum for children transmission of faith. Children are taught the Bible and are made to obey the teachings of Jesus. An important aspect of children's curriculum is the Shema. The Shema is a central declaration of faith in Yahwism which later metamorphosizes into Judaism, expressing the monotheistic essence of the religion. It serves as both a statement of faith and a reminder of the covenant between God and the people of Israel. The prayer begins with the words "Shema Yisrael," which means "Hear, O Israel." The opening line is: "Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad," translating to "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord is One." Fundamentally, Shema in Hebrew means "hear" or "listen". According to McConville and Opade, Shema embodies the very core of the Jewish faith, which ranges from the core principle of believing in one God, which could be said to affirm the relationship of YHWH and Israel. Beyond the affirmation, it also emphasizes the importance of teaching God's law to children. This reinforces the idea that faith is not just a personal belief, but a shared commitment passed down through generations, which could be described as the intergenerational transmission of faith.

Intergenerational Transmission of Faith (ITF) means passing down religious beliefs, values, and practices from generation to generation. It concerns how faith is preserved, enriched, and carried forward through time. This process is vital for children's spiritual formation as it provides the foundational knowledge and understanding of their faith. Children learn about history, beliefs, rituals, and stories that define their religious tradition through series of activities they engage in as they grow. This learning creates a sense of connection and belongs to a larger faith community. It also enhances identity development as children engage with their faith

tradition through family, community, and religious education and develop a strong sense of identity.

Also, Intergenerational Transmission of Faith (ITF) lays the groundwork for children's spiritual formation. It provides them with knowledge, values, and experiences that help them develop a strong sense of identity and community. This endeavor is essential for nurturing the next generation along their identity and communal lifestyle as believers for the continuity of religious traditions.

This paper examines the Shema, a foundation for Jewish identity, ritual and Practice, through textual analysis of Deuteronomy 6:4-6. The analysis shall guide the exploration of the meaning and implications of the Shema's core tenets as a framework for spiritual growth, and before conclusion, will look into intergenerational transmission of faith through the Shema. This paper submit that the Shema, when actively incorporated into intergenerational practices, acts as a powerful catalyst for children's spiritual formation and development, fostering a deep connection to Christian identity, values, and traditions that transcends generations as it answers the question of how does the Shema contribute to the development of children's spiritual identity and sense of belonging in a contemporary world often characterized by secularism and cultural diversity, and how can the Shema effectively bridge generational gaps and ensure continued faith transmission.

### **Historical Foundation of Shema**

The historical foundation of Shema spanned through five major divisions, ranging from Deuteronomic Origins, the Early Rabbinic Period, the Medieval Period, the Modern Era, to the Holocaust and its aftermath. Considering the Deuteronomic origins of Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4-9 is part of a larger context of a covenant renewal ceremony where Moses instructs the Israelites to love God and live by his laws. Within this context, the Shema emerges as a central commandment, emphasizing monotheism and the importance of Intergenerational faith transmission. This Norman iterates when he submits that the passage is a powerful testament to the centrality of monotheism in the Jewish faith. It was recited by ancient Israelites as a

declaration of their commitment to God, emphasizing the importance of loving God with all their being, and underscoring the core belief in one God.

During their Exodus from Egypt and journey through the wilderness, the Israelites were in a formative period, establishing their identity as a nation. God's covenant with the Israelites, symbolized by the Ten Commandments, formed the foundation of their religious and societal structure. Deuteronomy, written centuries later, aimed to reaffirm this covenant and guide the Israelites as they entered the promised land. Therefore, Deuteronomy could be viewed as a "covenant renewal" document, reaffirming God's covenant with Israel as they prepared to enter the promised land. It presents a codification of laws, focusing on aspects of religious, social, and ethical life, guiding the Israelites in their new home. Within this context, the Shema emerges as a central commandment, reflecting the core values and principles underlying these laws, and was also considered a central element of daily prayer during the early rabbinic period (1st-5th centuries CE).

Furthermore, during the modern era, Shema remains a core element of daily Jewish prayer, and it is recited by individuals and communities worldwide. It continues to be passed down through generations, with families incorporating it into bedtime rituals and other practices. Another period in the study of Shema down the line of life is the Holocaust and its aftermath. Like other periods in the life of a typical Jew, Shema is a powerful symbol of resilience for Jewish survivors of the Holocaust, reminding them of their faith and their enduring spirit.

### **The Textual Analysis of Deuteronomy 6:4-6**

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 strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your heart. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down, and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates. (Deut. 6:4-9, NIV)

One primary focus of this session is determining the meaning of the Shema and how it functions within the book of Deuteronomy. The English title of the book derives from the Septuagint, τό δευτερονόμιον τοῦτο.” Deuteronomy is more than just a repetition of the law already given in Exodus; it can instead be viewed as an 'amplification and advancement of the covenant texts.’’ Therefore, the book of Deuteronomy exposes the Decalogue and the pericope can be seen as the positive summation of the first part of the Decalogue which can be divided into three parts: the first is a confession of who God is (verse 4), the second a command (verse 5), and the remainder of the portion (verses 6-9) shows us how these two things are to shape our lives.

שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד:

- i. Verse 4: Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.

The first word שְׁמַע of this passage in Hebrew gives the name to this famous passage, meaning to hear. The word is a verb qal imperative masculine singular, which expresses the tone and the force behind the word. Firstly, it is imperative; therefore, it must be considered a challenge that is not negotiable. It must never be taken lightly, though it is in the qal stem. This word does not simply mean the act of hearing what was to be said but has a much broader meaning, including obedience. Haggai, why, pointing out the importance of this as a command, points out that Israel was to hear and obey the words that were to follow. More to the importance of the Shema is that it creates an immediate connection between God and the people, setting the stage for a foundational declaration.

The confession that follows יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד lays a claim on Israel and gives them an identity, as well as declaring who God is. This central statement, often called the Shema itself, is a declaration of monotheism. It forcefully emphasizes the unity of God, rejecting idolatry and polytheism. This concept is crucial for Jewish identity, as it distinguishes Judaism from other religious traditions.

Deuteronomy 6:5 וְכָל-נַפְשֶׁךָ וְכָל-מְאֵדֶךָ וְכָל-לְבָבְךָ בְּכָל-יְמֵי חַיֶּיךָ אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ

- ii. Verse 5: Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

This further commandment emphasizes the central role of love in the relationship between God and the people. It demands a total and unreserved devotion, encompassing the entirety of one's being ("heart, soul, and strength"). This commitment goes beyond mere obedience. It reflects a deep, emotional connection. In his statement, Miller submits that the confession leads directly to the commandment. Because God is our God, and He is God alone and unique in all He is, His people must love Him. In this context, love can be commanded. Love is not just an emotion but a verb, an act of the will. Love encompasses obedience, loyalty, and allegiance. "It is closely related to fear and reverence. It is expressed in loyalty and service. Its primary manifestation is in obedience to the demands of the law."

Although there are different interpretations of this verse, especially for what is meant by loving God with all your heart, soul, and strength, Hall explains that in Hebrew thought, the heart would be equated with the mind, intellect, will, and intentions; the soul would encompass the emotions, desires, and character, and strength is an unusual translation for the Hebrew word that is more often translated as significantly or exceedingly so could stress a total commitment. Later, Jewish thought interpreted strength as wealth. Another interpretation saw the phrases building up to a climax: semantically concentric, climatic parallelism, expressing a total commitment with the final expression accenting "the superlative degree of total commitments." However, the verse underscores the central role of love in the relationship between God and the people. It demands a total and unreserved devotion, encompassing the entirety of one's being ("heart, soul, and strength")

Deuteronomy 6:6 וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה אֲשֶׁר אֶנִּי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם עַל-לְבָבְךָ:

- iii. Verse 6: These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.

This statement emphasizes the internalization of the commandments. They are not merely external laws to be followed but should become part of one's inner being, shaping thoughts, actions, and motivations. This internalization highlights the importance of living a life guided by God's principles. While interpreting this text,

Merrill says that if a person is to love God as He has commanded truly, the commands of God are to be more than just a rule book to be followed. His commands should always be at the forefront of a person's thoughts and be part of a person's "conscious reflection." Therefore, God's commands are to be interwoven with the very fabric of a person's being. This God achieved in us under the New Covenant through the Holy Spirit.

Deuteronomy 6:7 וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָבְךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְּךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ:

- iv. Impress them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home, when you are away, when you lie down, and when you get up.

The clause, וְשִׁנַּנְתֶּם לְבָבְךָ וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָּם "Impress them on your children..." is a call for intergenerational transmission of faith, making these principles a family legacy. It highlights the importance of consistent and ongoing discussion and reflection on God's teachings, weaving them into daily life. To impress them, Hall says, is to repeat or recount for the children. Merrill says it is a picture of inscribing God's commands with "indelible sharpness and precision" like an engraver. When God made the covenant with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, He was not just making it with those physically present at the time, but it was for all generations to come. He is "our God"; therefore, all who are the people of God are a part of the covenant. Each generation must ensure that the next generation also takes commandments upon their hearts.

Deuteronomy 6:8 וְקָשַׁרְתָּם לְאָזֹן עַל־יָדְךָ וְהָיוּ לְטֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ:

Deuteronomy 6:9 וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל־מְזוּזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ: ט

- v. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead; inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and your gates.

The law of the LORD should not only become part of one's inner being, shaping thoughts, actions, and motivations. According to verses 8-9, it should become a public expression of faith. "Tie them as symbols..." refers to the "tefillin" (phylacteries), small leather boxes containing verses from the Torah that are worn on the forehead and arm during morning prayer. Moreover, "Write them..." refers to the

“mezuzah,” a small scroll containing Deuteronomy 6:4-9 placed on the doorpost of Jewish homes. These practices are visible reminders of God's commandments and create a constant presence of faith. However, beyond tradition, the author aligns with Wiersbe's belief that the symbols should be taken metaphorically. The emphasis is that God's people are to be obedient to the Word of God in all they think (foreheads) and do (hands), as well as governing who is permitted to enter the gates and the house. The home was a “sanctuary for the Lord and a place where the Word was loved, obeyed, and taught.”

### **Shema for Intergenerational Transmission of Faith**

Intergenerational transmission of faith is applicable and profitable to children's developmental stages. The parents and the church throughout the stages of the child's development could apply the biblical principle of Shema. Applying the Shema as a principle for faith intergenerational transmission will bring about.

*Values and Morality:* Intergenerational faith transmission plays a crucial role in shaping a child's moral compass. Children will learn about values like compassion, justice, integrity, and respect, which are often embedded within religious teachings. These values guide their decision-making and interactions with others.

*Spiritual Growth:* Intergenerational transmission of faith involves not just passing on knowledge but also creating a spiritual environment where children can grow in their faith. Through shared experiences, rituals, and conversations, children are encouraged to explore their relationship with God, develop their spiritual practices, and cultivate a sense of awe and wonder.

*Community Connection:* Intergenerational faith transmission fosters a sense of community and belonging. It strengthens the bond between children and their families and the wider religious community. Children learn to appreciate the value of shared traditions, support, and fellowship.

*Future of Faith:* The success of intergenerational transmission ultimately determines the future of any faith tradition. When faith is passed down meaningfully and engagingly, future generations are empowered to continue the legacy, adapt to new



challenges, and contribute to the ongoing evolution of their faith. With its simple yet profound message, the Shema offers a powerful tool for intergenerational faith transformation and fostering children's spiritual development.

- i. **Bridging Generations through Shared Meaning:** The Shema serves as a common ground, a shared expression of faith that connects grandparents, parents, and children. Reciting it together creates a sense of unity and belonging, regardless of age or individual levels of religious observance. Families can use the Shema as a starting point for conversations about faith, exploring its meaning, history, and how it relates to their lives.
- ii. **Instilling Love for God and Tradition:** The Shema's central message of love and commitment to God can be embedded in children's hearts through repeated recitation and meaningful engagement. By incorporating the Shema into daily routines, bedtime stories, or family celebrations, children learn to associate this powerful prayer with love, connection, and belonging.
- iii. **Teaching Values and Moral Compass:** The Shema's emphasis on loving God and following His commandments provides a framework for teaching values like kindness, compassion, justice, and integrity. Parents and educators can use the Shema as a springboard for discussions about moral dilemmas, ethical choices, and the importance of living a righteous life. **Building a Sense of Identity and Purpose:** The Shema affirms Jewish identity and anchors children within their faith heritage. This reinforces a sense of belonging and purpose.
- iv. **Inspiring Intergenerational Dialogue:** The Shema's call to teach future generations opens doors for meaningful intergenerational dialogue. Grandparents can share stories of their experiences with the Shema, how it influenced their lives, and the challenges they faced in passing on their faith. This creates a bridge between generations, fostering understanding and appreciation.
- v. **Unlocking Creativity and Engagement:** The Shema can be adapted to different learning styles and interests. Through storytelling, art, music, drama, or interactive games, children can engage with the Shema creatively, increasing their understanding and connection to its message.

- vi. **Creating Lasting Memories and Spiritual Connection:** The Shema offers a powerful tool for creating lasting memories and fostering a deeper spiritual connection. Whether reciting the Shema before bedtime, lighting Shabbat candles together, or experiencing a family Seder, these rituals create shared experiences that bond families and strengthen their faith.

Practical Approaches to the application of the Shema in intergenerational transmission of faith.

The shema can be practically applied for everyday living of children in the following ways.

### **Symbolic Representation**

The wristbands and head bands can be used as faith Symbols. Wristbands and headbands can be designed with symbols or inscriptions that represent the Christian faith's core beliefs, values, or teachings. For example, a Jewish wristband might feature symbols like the Star of David or Hebrew phrases such as "Shema Yisrael. Today, various churches have fellowships and programmes where faith symbols like the sword of the spirit, love, dove signifying the Holy Spirit are inscribed on wristbands, headbands and T-Shirts. When these items symbolizing one's faith are worn as bans, it creates a personal connection to spiritual teachings and encourages discussions about their meanings.

### **Ritual and Tradition**

Families and Churches can incorporate wearable items into religious rituals or ceremonies. For instance, children in the Old Testament often receive a special wristband during their Bar or Bat Mitzvah as a reminder of their responsibilities and commitments to their faith. In the Nigerian Baptist Convention churches, the Girls Auxiliary are given badges with different signs, crown, scepter, cape, and Bible to signify that they are queens, they have authority as children of God, they are regents representing Christ wherever they go, and the Bible is their companion which they must not toil with. This unique girls' auxilliary ceremony and gifting and wearing these items enhance the significance of the girls' auxiliary recognition and coronation

ceremonies. This ceremony also involves reciting Bible verses, blessings, prayers, and storytelling about the importance of the Christian faith.

### **Educational Tools**

The items in the shema (wristbands and headbands), can also be used as teaching tools during family gatherings or religious education classes. Discussing the significance of the symbols and messages on these items can lead to deeper conversations about faith. Children should be encouraged to design their wristbands with words or symbols representing what they believe in or value about their faith. This creative process fosters personal engagement.

### **Encouraging Reminders**

The wristbands and headbands also serve as daily reminders of one's faith and values when it is worn regularly. This will help children to reflect on their beliefs regularly. When these items are made visible, it leads to conversations with peers, friends, or family members about one's faith, thereby encouraging intergenerational dialogue.

### **Community Building**

Children can be encouraged to distribute matching wristbands or headbands within families or communities to foster a sense of belonging and unity among family and church members. This shared identity reinforces communal ties and collective values. Intergenerational Programs can also be organized where different generations come together to create or wear these items while discussing their significance concerning faith.

### **Promoting Values and Actions**

Wristbands can carry messages about specific virtues (e.g., kindness, compassion) central to the faith tradition. These messages encourage individuals to embody those values in everyday life. Children can create wristbands that commemorate participation in community service projects as part of living out one's faith. This will encourage children to engage in acts of service alongside adults.

## Conclusion

Wristbands, headbands, and similar wearable items offer creative ways to facilitate intergenerational transmission of faith by serving as symbols of belief, educational tools, daily reminders, and community-building resources. By incorporating these items into family traditions and rituals, families can strengthen their connections to each other and

their shared spiritual heritage while fostering meaningful conversations about faith across generations. The Shema is more than just a prayer; it catalyzes intergenerational faith transformation. It provides a common language, a foundation for values, and a gateway to exploring the richness of Jewish tradition. By embracing the Shema, families, churches can create a spiritual legacy that resonates for future generations.

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