
UNIT 2 PHILOSOPHY OF JUDAISM

Contents

- 2.0 Objectives
- 2.1 Introduction
- 2.2 Basic Principles of Faith
- 2.3 Conceptions of God
- 2.4 The *Kabbalah* (mysticism)
- 2.5 The concept of the Chosen Race
- 2.6 The Messianic Age
- 2.7 Ethics
- 2.8 Reward and punishment
- 2.9 *Mussar* movement
- 2.10 Beliefs on Afterlife
- 2.11 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.12 Key Words
- 2.13 Further Readings and References

2.0 OBJECTIVES

Judaism is one of the three Semitic religions and the other two religions, namely Christianity and Islam, have their roots in the Judaic tradition. Although small in number, the influence of Judaism in this world cannot go unnoticed. The aim of this paper is to help the students understand the importance of the Judaic religion, its tenets and principles, and the value system propagated by it, which has largely been incorporated in Islam and Christianity.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Judaism is the religion followed by the Jewish people and it revolves mainly around the Holy Land (Jerusalem). It is a monotheistic religion (belief only in one God). It is more than 3500 years old and was founded by Moses, who is considered to be the greatest of all prophets who brought together in one fold the many tribes of Israel, under a common covenant believed to be between Abraham and God. Today, there are around 14.5 million Jews around the world, mainly settled in Israel and North America. The religion is non-hierarchical and is traditionally organized with the rabbi as the local head. (It may be remembered that a rabbi is not a priest, but a leader). There are several divisions/branches in Judaism: Orthodox, Conservative, reformed, etc. and a few other diverse movements like, Zionism, Reconstructionism, Karaite, Judaism etc. Judaism is rich in its sacred writings (*Tanakh*) and is primarily written in Hebrew. The

following sections will explain in detail the belief pattern and the philosophy of the Jews.

2.2 BASIC PRINCIPLES OF FAITH

The essence of Judaism lies in its basic principles, which could be summarized in 13 principles.

God exists: God exists and He is the Creator and Guide of everything that has been created. Only He is the maker of the past, present, and future things.

God is one and unique: God is ONE and there is no one else who is like him or equal to him. There is only ONE God and this God is God who was, is, and will be.

God is incorporeal (spiritual in nature): God has no body. He is Spiritual in nature. He is free from all the properties of matter and therefore, there can be no comparisons to Him whatsoever.

God is eternal: God is the beginning and the end, (the Alpha and the Omega). He is present from eternity.

Prayer is to be directed to God alone: God alone is the appropriate object of worship and prayer. It is not right to pray to any being besides Him.

The words of the (Hebrew) prophets are true: All the words said by the prophets are true. They have prophesized what God had commanded them to do and so there can be no falsity in them.

Moses was the greatest prophet, and his prophecies are true: Of all the prophets, the chief and the greatest of all prophets was Moses. There was none greater than him either before him or after him.

The Torah was given to Moses: The Torah (both oral and written) was given to Moses, who is THE teacher for all the Jews.

There will be no other Torah other than the one revealed to Moses: The Torah cannot be exchanged or changed, because it was revealed to Moses by God.

God knows the thoughts and deeds of human beings: God, who is the Creator of all humans, knows all the actions, attitudes and thoughts of human beings. A reference about this is found in Psalms 33:15 “Who fashioned the hearts of them all, Who comprehends all their actions”

God will reward the good and punish the wicked: The good are those who keep God’s commandments and these people will be rewarded; while those who disobey the commandments will be punished.

The Messiah will come at the proper time: God has promised to send the Messiah and He will keep His promise and the Messiah will come at the right time. (Only God knows the right time)

The dead will be resurrected: When God deems it right, then the dead will be resurrected and they will glorify Him forever.

Check Your Progress I

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

1) What are the principles of faith?

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2) What is the relationship between life and God according to Judaic beliefs?

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2.3 CONCEPTION OF GOD

Judaism is based on strict monotheism. This doctrine expresses the belief in one indivisible God. The concepts of multiple gods (polytheism) or of a God taking multiple forms (for example the Trinity) are contrary to their belief. The prayer par excellence is the *Shema Yisrael*: “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One”. It is also translated as “Hear O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is unique/alone” (Deuteronomy 6:4). (Wikipedia: *Jewish_principles_of_faith*)

So the Jews conceive God as eternal, the creator of the universe, and the source of morality. God has the power to intervene in the world. So God is an actual ontological reality, and is not merely a projection of the human psyche. Maimonides, for instance, describes God as: “A Being, perfect in every possible way, who is the ultimate cause of all existence. All existence depends on God and is derived from God.” (Wikipedia: *God_in_Judaism*)

God is the creator of the universe: According to the Biblical account, the world was created by God in six days. While many Haredi Jews take this literally, most of the Modern Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform authorities feel that the six days should be interpreted as “stages” in the creation of the universe. In this way Judaism would feel out of place with the current scientific model that states that the universe is about 13.7 billion years old. (Wikipedia: *Jewish_principles_of_faith*)

God is One: The idea of God as a duality or trinity is heretical – “it is considered akin to polytheism” as *Wikipedia* holds. “[God], the Cause of all, is one. This does not mean one as in one of a pair, nor one like a species (which encompasses many individuals), nor one as in an object that is made up of many elements, nor as a single simple object that is infinitely divisible. Rather, God is a unity unlike any other possible unity.” This is referred to in the Torah (Deuteronomy 6:4): “Hear Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.” (Wikipedia: *God_in_Judaism*)

God is all-powerful: Orthodox Jews believe in the omnipotent, omniscient God. Thus, most rabbinic works present God as having the properties of omnipotence, omniscience and omnibenevolence (that is, being all good). Here the issue of theodicy or problem of evil comes up, especially after the extreme horrors of the Holocaust when several theological responses surfaced. The central questions they address are whether and how God is all-powerful and all-good, given the existence of evil in the world, particularly the Holocaust, which eliminated about six million Jews.

God is personal: Most of classical Judaism views God as personal. According to them, humans have a relationship with God; God has a relationship with us. Much of the *midrash*, and many Jewish prayers imagine God as caring about humanity just as we care about God.

2.4 THE KABBALAH (MYSTICISM)

The mystical tradition in Judaism or *Kabbalah*, contains further elaborations about God, which are not accepted by all Jews. For example it admits the possibility of reincarnation, which is generally rejected by non-mystical Jewish theologians and philosophers. It also believes in a triple soul, of which the lowest level (*nefesh* or animal life) dissolves into the elements, the middle layer (*ruach* or intellect) goes to *Gan Eden* (Paradise) while the highest level (*neshamah* or spirit) seeks union with God. (Wikipedia: *Jewish_principles_of_faith*)

Judaism has considered “*Tikkun Olam*” (or Repairing the world) as a fundamental reason for God’s creating the world. The Jews are also called to “repair the world.” Therefore, the concept of “life after death” is not encouraged as the sole motivating factor for human action. Indeed it is held that one can attain closeness to God even in this world, through moral and spiritual perfection. The primary written work in the Kabbalistic tradition is the Zohar. Normally, rabbis discouraged teaching this material to anyone under the age of 40, since they may misinterpret it without sufficient grounding in the basics.

2.5 THE CONCEPT OF THE CHOSEN RACE

One of the fundamental features of Judaism is their notion of a chosen race. God chose them through a unique covenant with God; the description of this covenant is the Torah itself. Contrary to popular belief, Jewish people do not simply say that “God chose the Jews” from among other people. Such a claim is made nowhere in the Tanakh (the Jewish Bible). In fact, such a claim could imply that God loves only the Jewish people or that only Jews can have a heavenly reward. The claim actually made is that the Jews were chosen for a specific mission or for a particular duty: to be a light unto the nations. (Wikipedia: *Jewish_principles_of_faith*)

Rabbi Lord Immanuel Jakobovits, former Chief Rabbi of the United Synagogue of Great Britain, describes the mainstream Jewish view on this issue: “Yes, I do believe the chosen people concept as affirmed by Judaism in its holy writ, its prayers, and its millennial tradition. In fact, I believe that every people and indeed, in a more limited way, every individual is ‘chosen’ or destined for some distinct purpose in advancing the designs of Providence. Only, some fulfill their mission and others do not. Maybe the Greeks were chosen for their unique contributions to art and philosophy, the Romans for their pioneering services

in law and government, the British for bringing parliamentary rule into the world, and the Americans for piloting democracy in a pluralistic society. The Jews were chosen by God to be ‘peculiar unto Me’ as the pioneers of religion and morality; that was and is their national purpose.” (Wikipedia: *Jews_as_a_chosen_people*)

2.6 THE MESSIANIC AGE

The Jews believe that there will be a Jewish Messiah known as *Mashiach*, a king who will rule the Jewish people independently and according to Jewish law. It may be noted that the Jewish vision of Messianic times has nothing much in common with the Christian understanding. Jewish views of the Messiah are as derived from the Davidic line or the Messianic era.

Terminology: “messianic” and “eschatology”: In the context of “Messianic Age”, the earliest meaning of the word “messianic” is derived from the notion of *Yemot HaMashiach* meaning “The Days of the Messiah”, that is, the Jewish Messiah, meaning “related to the Messiah.” Messiah comes from a Hebrew word meaning “The Anointed One”, i.e., a person who is “specially appointed and empowered”. Originally this phrase—the “anointed one”—referred to either a king who was anointed with Holy anointing oil as part of what might be understood to be his coronation ceremony. Eschatology is an area of religious scholarship that deals with prophecies about “the end of the current age” of human civilization. (Wikipedia: *Messianic_Age*)

Description of the Messianic Era: According to Jewish tradition, the Messianic Era will be one of universal peace and harmony, an era free of strife and hardship, and one conducive to the furthestmost of the knowledge of the Creator. The theme of the Messiah ushering in an era of global peace is succinctly captured by Isaiah: “They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks; nation will not lift sword against nation and they will no longer study warfare (Isaiah 2:4).” This is one of the most quoted passages from the Bible. Maimonides describes the Messianic Era as follows: “And at that time there will be no hunger or war, no jealousy or rivalry, for the good will be plentiful, and all delicacies available as dust. The entire occupation of the world will be only to know God... the people of Israel will be of great wisdom; they will perceive the esoteric truths and comprehend their Creator’s wisdom as is the capacity of human. As it is written (Isaiah 11:9): ‘For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea’.” (Wikipedia)

Arrival of the Messianic Era: According to the Talmud, the Midrash, and the ancient Kabbalistic work, the Zohar, the Messiah must arrive before the year 6000 from the time of creation. (According to Orthodox Jewish belief, the Hebrew calendar dates to the time of creation. The year 2010 corresponds to the year 5770 from creation). The Midrash comments: “Six eons for going in and coming out, for war and peace. The seventh eon is entirely Shabbat and rest for life. The Kabbalistic tradition maintains that each of the seven days of the week, which are based upon the seven days of creation, correspond to the seven millennia of creation. The tradition teaches that the seventh day of the week, the Sabbath day of rest, corresponds to the seventh millennium, the age of universal ‘rest’ - the Messianic Era. The seventh millennium perforce begins with the year 6000, and is the latest time the Messiah can come. Such statements, obviously, must not be taken literally, but symbolically.

Check Your Progress II

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) What are the qualities of God according to the Jews?

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- 2) Explain God as the creator of the Universe.

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- 3) What are the salient features in the Kabbalah?

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2.7 ETHICS

The soul is pure at birth. Humans are born morally pure. Therefore, Judaism has no concept analogous to original sin. Judaism affirms that people are born with a *yetzer ha-tov*, a tendency to do good, and with a *yetzer ha-ra*, a tendency to do evil. Thus human beings have free will and can choose the path in life that they will take. The rabbis even recognize a positive value to the *yetzer ha-ra*: without the *yetzer ha-ra* there would be no civilization or other fruits of human labor. The implication, therefore, is that *yetzer ha-tov* and *yetzer ha-ra* are best understood not only as moral categories of good and evil but as the inherent conflict within human beings between selfless and selfish orientations. (Wikipedia: *Jewish_principles_of_faith*)

Judaism recognizes two classes of “sin”: offenses against other people, and offenses against God. Offenses against God may be understood as violation of a contract or the covenant (between God and the Jews). The sins can be atoned for. A classical rabbinic work, *Avot de-Rabbi Natan*, tells a story. Once, when Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai was walking in Jerusalem with Rabbi Yehosua, they arrived where the Temple in Jerusalem now stood in ruins. “Woe to us,” cried Rabbi Yehosua, “for this house where atonement was made for Israel’s sins now lies in ruins!” Answered Rabban Yochanan, “We have another, equally important source of atonement, the practice of *gemiluth hasadim* (loving kindness), as it is stated: “I desire loving kindness and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6). Also, the Babylonian Talmud teaches that “Rabbi Yochanan and Rabbi Eleazar both explain that as long as the Temple stood, the altar atoned for Israel, but now, one’s table atones [when the poor are invited as guests].” Similarly, the Jewish liturgy holds that prayer, repentance and *tzedakah* (charity) atone for sin.

2.8 REWARD AND PUNISHMENT

The mainstream Jewish view is that God will reward those who observe His commandments and punish those who intentionally transgress them.

According to the Talmud, God judges whether we have followed His commandments and to what extent. Those who do not “pass the test” go to a purifying place (sometimes referred to as *Gehinnom*, i.e. Hell, which is temporary) to “learn their lesson”. There is, however, for the most part, no eternal damnation. The vast majority of souls only go to that reforming place for a limited amount of time. Certain people are spoken of as having “no part in the world to come”, but this appears to mean that they will be annihilated rather than being tormented eternally. (Wikipedia *Jewish_principles_of_faith*)

Some philosophers, like Maimonides, believed that God did not actually give rewards and punishments as such. According to them these were beliefs of judgment and were necessary for the masses to believe, in order to maintain a structured society and to encourage the observance of Judaism. However, if we learn the Torah properly, we would know the higher truths. According to this view, the human reward is that if a person perfected his intellect to the highest degree, then the part of his intellect that connected to God – the active intellect – would be immortalized and enjoy the “Glory of the Presence” for all eternity. The punishment would simply be that no part of one’s intellect be immortalized with God.

2.9 MUSSAR MOVEMENT

Origin of the movement: The Hebrew word *mussar*, meaning “tradition,” usually refers to Jewish ethics in general, or more commonly to the Jewish ethics education movement that developed in the 19th century among the Orthodox Jewish European community. This movement began among non-Hasidic Jews as a response to the social changes brought about by The Enlightenment and afterwards. The strong sentiments of anti-Semitism, assimilation of many Jews into Christianity, and the poor living conditions of many Jews caused severe tension among them. Therefore, many religious Jews felt that their way of life was slipping away from them, observance of traditional Jewish law and custom was on the decline, and what they felt was worst of all, many of those who remained loyal to the tradition were losing their emotional connection to the traditional inner meaning.

The Mussar (also written as Musar) movement seeks to revive Jewish tradition. It is a path of contemplative practices and exercises that have evolved over the past thousand years to help an individual soul to pinpoint and then to break through the barriers that surround and obstruct the flow of inner light in our lives. Mussar is a treasury of techniques and understandings that offers immensely valuable guidance for the journey of our lives. The goal of Mussar practice is to release the light of holiness that lives within the soul. According to them, the roots of all our thoughts and actions can be traced to the depths of the soul, beyond the reach of the light of consciousness, and so the methods Mussar provides include meditations, guided contemplations, exercises, and chants that are all intended to penetrate down to the darkness of the subconscious, bringing about radical change at the root of our nature (Wikipedia *Musar_movement*).

Contemporary revival of the Mussar Movement: Many of the Jews involved in the Mussar movement were killed. Some, however, settled in Israel. Many others of the Mussar movement settled in the United States and were involved in a variety of Jewish institutions.

2.10 BELIEFS ON AFTERLIFE

Jewish sacred texts and literature have little to say about what happens after death. But Judaism is focused more on actions than beliefs, so it is actually to be expected that its prophets and sages have not spent as much time on speculations about the world to come as elaborations on the Jewish law to be performed in this life. The Torah and Talmud alike focus on the purpose of earthly life, which is to fulfill one's duties to God and one's fellow human beings. Succeeding at this brings reward, failing at it brings punishment. There is not much talk on rewards and punishments after death. It is interesting to note that the Hebrew word *Olam Ha-Ba* ("the world to come") is used for both the messianic age and the afterlife. This word is very important and something to look forward to. An oral Torah says, "This world is like a lobby before the *Olam Ha-Ba*. Prepare yourself in the lobby so that you may enter the banquet hall." A popular exhortation to contemporary audience is: "This world is only like a hotel. The world to come is like a home." ("Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife" 2004)

The Afterlife in the Torah

For the most part, the Torah describes the afterlife in vague terms, many of which may simply be figurative ways of speaking about death as it is observed by the living. An early common theme is that death means rejoining one's ancestors. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and other patriarchs are "gathered to their people" after death. In contrast, the wicked are "cut off from their people." Other concrete imageries emphasize the finality of death: the dead are like dust returning to dust or water poured out on the ground ("Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife" 2004). Another recurring biblical image of the afterlife is as a shadowy place called *Sheol*, a place of darkness and silence, located in low places. Gradually, the concept of conscious life after death begins to develop in the Torah.

Tehiyat Hameitim: Resurrection of the Dead

Sophisticated concepts of the resurrection of the dead and afterlife seem to have entered Judaism under Hellenistic influence after the Torah was completed. It became one of the fundamental beliefs in rabbinic Judaism, the intellectual successors of the Pharisees. The Sadducees, familiar to New Testament readers as those who denied the resurrection, were an exception. In fact, the resurrection of the dead is one of Maimonides' Thirteen Articles of Belief, and the frequently-recited Jewish prayer contains several references to the resurrection. How this resurrection might occur has been a matter of speculation in later years. Rabbi Hiyya ben Joseph suggested that "the dead will come up through the ground and rise up in Jerusalem... and the righteous will rise up fully clothed". Saadia ben Yosef al-Fayyumi (892-942 C.E.), a prominent Jewish scholar, offered this explanation: "Even fire, which causes things to be burned so quickly, merely effects the separation of the parts of a thing...causing the dust part to return to ashes....It does not however, bring about the annihilation of anything. Nor is it conceivable that anyone should have the power to annihilate anything to

the point where it would vanish completely except its Creator, who produced it out of nothing.” (“Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife” 2004)

Judgment

How is one’s destination decided? Judaism believes in a judgement, according to one’s actions. The School of Shammai offered the following description: There will be three groups on the Day of Judgment: one of thoroughly righteous people, one of thoroughly wicked people, and one of people in between. The first group will be immediately inscribed for everlasting life; the second group will be doomed in *Gehinnom* [Hell], as it says, “And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life and some to reproaches and everlasting abhorrence” [Daniel 12:2], the third will go down to *Gehinnom* and squeal and rise again, as it says, “And I will bring the third part through the fire, and will refine them as silver is refined, and will try them as gold is tried. They shall call on My name and I will answer them” [Zechariah 13:9] (“Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife” 2004) On the other hand, the school of Hillel suggested a more merciful view, in which the middle group are sent directly to *Gan Eden* (Heaven) instead of *Gehinnom* after death. Going further, Rabbi Hanina added that all who go down to *Gehinnom* will go up again, “except adulterers, those who put their fellows to shame in public, and those who call their fellows by an obnoxious name.” (“Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife” 2004)

Gan Eden: Heaven

Traditional Judaism includes belief in both heaven and hell, but is understood differently from Christianity. In Judaism, the eternal destination for the righteous is *Gan Eden* (the Garden of Eden), which is a place of great joy and peace. Some of the Talmudic imagery for heaven are: sitting at golden banquet tables or at stools of gold, enjoying lavish banquets or celebrating the Sabbath, enjoying sunshine and sexual intercourse. On the other hand, other thinkers have offered a more spiritual view of *Gad Eden*. One Jewish author thinks that in heaven “there will be neither eating nor drinking; no procreation of children or business transactions, no envy or hatred or rivalry; but sitting enthroned, their crowns on their heads, enjoying the Shechinah [Divine Presence]”. Such a spiritual enjoyment in heaven is confirmed by Maimonides, who holds: “In the world to come, there is nothing corporeal, and no material substance; there are only souls of the righteous without bodies — like the ministering angels... The righteous attain to a knowledge and realization of truth concerning God to which they had not attained while they were in the murky and lowly body.” (“Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife” 2004)

Gehinnom: Hell

The Jewish concept of the afterlife for the wicked is not that elaborately reflected on. Known as *Gehinnom* (*Gehenna* in Yiddish) or *Sheo’l*, it has its foundations in the dark pit described in the Torah. They are related to an actual place of pagan cult and rituals, including burning children. *Gehinnom* is the destiny of unrighteous Jews and Gentiles. According to some, the souls in *Gehinnom* are punished only up to twelve months. Many believe that after an appropriate period of purification, the righteous go to *Gan Eden*. But the really wicked endure the full year of punishment and then are either annihilated or continue to be punished. (“Jewish Beliefs on the Afterlife” 2004) So about an eternal Hell, Judaism does not speak openly and emphatically.

Check Your Progress III

Note: Use the space provided for your answer

- 1) Does Judaism place importance in ethics and moral living? Substantiate your answer.

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- 2) Is God a judge in Judaism?

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2.11 LET US SUM UP

We have seen some of the Jewish beliefs, thoughts, and philosophical reflections. It must be noted that the philosophical reflections are based on concrete experiences and imageries. It also focuses on the positive, rather than on the nihilistic side of life. This can be traced to their world-view which is primarily tribal and primeval. Therefore, we have not gone into well-defined and conceptually demanding notions on the Jewish religion and tradition.

2.12 KEY WORDS

Covenant: The central theme of Judaism is the covenant between the Jews and God. This was first made by Abraham, from whom the Jewish believe they came. This covenant was renewed with Abraham's son Isaac, and Abraham's grandson Jacob. The covenant was extended as Moses was given the Ten Commandments and other laws. From this, the Jews learn how they should lead their lives. The covenant involves that the Jews are a chosen people, giving them certain rights as well as responsibilities.

Eschatology: Jewish eschatology is concerned with the Jewish Messiah, afterlife, and the revival of the dead. Eschatology, generically, is the area of theology and philosophy concerned with the final events in the history of the world, the ultimate destiny of humanity, and related concepts.

Kabbalah: (Hebrew: *Qabbalah* lit. "receiving"; *Qabala*) is a discipline and school of thought concerned with the mystical aspect of Rabbinic Judaism. It is a set of esoteric teachings meant to explain the relationship between an eternal and mysterious Creator and the mortal and finite universe (His creation).

Messiah: The Hebrew word *Mashiach* (or *Moshiach*) refers to the Jewish idea of the Messiah. Like the English word Messiah, *Mashiach* means anointed. The Jewish messiah refers to a human leader, physically descended from the Davidic line, who will rule and unite the people of Israel and will usher in the Messianic Age of global and universal peace.

Mussar: The movement *Mussar* is a path of contemplative practices and exercises that have evolved over the past thousand years to help an individual soul to pinpoint and then to break through the barriers that surround and obstruct the flow of inner light in our lives. *Mussar* is a treasury of techniques and understandings that offers immensely valuable guidance for the journey of lives. The goal of *Mussar* practice is to release the light of holiness that lives within the soul.

Rabbi: is a religious teacher. The basic form of the rabbi developed in the Pharisaic and Talmudic era, when learned teachers assembled to codify Judaism's written and oral laws.

Shema: are the first two words of a section of the Torah that is a centerpiece of the morning and evening Jewish prayer services. The first verse encapsulates the monotheistic essence of Judaism: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one," found in Deuteronomy 6:4

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