

# The Hebrew Word “Shama” (שמע)

## Meaning, Usage, and Significance

### Root Meaning and Grammatical Form

**Shama** (שמע) is a common Hebrew verb meaning “**to hear**” or “**to listen.**” It is a primitive root that carries the sense of hearing “**intelligently,**” often with attention and **obedience** implied. In fact, Biblical Hebrew notably has **no separate verb for “to obey.”** Instead, *shama* serves that purpose – to **hear** is to **heed**. The word appears over **1,100 times** in the Hebrew Bible, underscoring its importance.

Grammatically, *shama* is used in the **Qal stem** for the simple act of hearing (e.g. “heard a sound”), but context gives it deeper nuance. Hebrew lexicons outline a **spectrum of meaning** for *shama*: it can indicate merely **perceiving a sound**, but also **paying close attention, understanding, accepting, or obeying** what is heard. In other words, one word *shama* is like an over-stuffed suitcase of meaning, encompassing multiple ideas that English might express with different terms. Some key nuances include:

- **Hearing a sound:** the basic sense of perceiving by ear.
- **Listening intently or with interest:** focusing on what is heard.
- **Understanding:** grasping the message or language being communicated.
- **Taking to heart / agreeing:** heeding, consenting to, or acknowledging what is said.
- **Responding with action:** obeying a request or command – hearing in a way that produces appropriate action.

No single English word perfectly captures *shama*’s full range. Perhaps the old-fashioned “**hearken**” or the phrase “**pay heed**” come closest to the mix of listening and responding that *shama* entails. Modern scholars often speak of “**active listening**” – a concept very much inherent in *shama*. To *shama*, in summary, is *not* just to hear sounds; it is to hear **thoughtfully and responsively**.

### Biblical Usage and Contexts (1 Samuel 3:10)

*Young Samuel responds to God’s call, saying “Speak, for Your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:10). In Hebrew, “listening” here is **shama**, implying an attentive, obedient hearing.*

The verb *shama* is woven throughout biblical narratives, often signaling the pivotal moment of someone either **listening to God** or tragically **refusing to listen**. One vivid example is the call of **Samuel** in 1 Samuel 3. The boy Samuel hears his name called in the night and eventually replies, “*Speak, for Your servant is listening*” (1 Sam 3:10). Significantly, the Hebrew text says

“Your servant is **shomea** (שָׁמַע)” – from *shama*, meaning “listening with attentive readiness.” This choice of word indicates **more than passive hearing**; Samuel is alert and ready to act on God’s word. In fact, “listening” (שָׁמַע, *shama*) in this verse “implies not just hearing but obeying and understanding”. Samuel’s open-eared response marks the beginning of his prophetic ministry, showing that **receptivity to God’s voice** is the foundation of serving Him.

Throughout Scripture, *shama* is used in contexts where hearing and obedience are intertwined. For instance, when God later rebukes King Saul, Samuel declares, “To obey is better than sacrifice” – literally “to **hear** (*shama*) is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22). Here *shama* clearly means obey, underscoring that **true hearing in God’s eyes is obedient hearing**. Likewise, in Genesis 22:18 God commends Abraham “because you have **obeyed** (*shama*) My voice”, equating Abraham’s faithful action with listening. In negative examples, when Israel or its leaders “would not listen,” the phrase implies willful disobedience, not a mere auditory failure. Thus, biblical usage consistently reveals *shama* as **hearing with a view toward response**.

Notably, *shama* often appears with the word “voice” (Hebrew *qol*). To “hear someone’s voice” can mean to **heed what they say**. In 1 Samuel 3, it was said of Samuel that “none of his words fell to the ground” because the Lord was with him – a testament that Samuel *heard* God’s voice and faithfully conveyed it (1 Sam 3:19–21). By contrast, Eli’s corrupt sons “did not listen to their father’s voice” (1 Sam 2:25), meaning they ignored his rebuke. The narrative contrast between young Samuel *shama*-ing God, and Eli’s sons refusing to *shama* instruction, highlights a broader biblical theme: **those who truly hear God are the ones who experience His guidance and favor**.

## Theological Implications: Listening as Obedience and Response

In biblical theology, *shama* illustrates that **hearing God is inherently active**. To the ancient Hebrew mind, *listening* and *obeying* were two sides of the same coin. This is why *shama* can mean “obey” just as naturally as “hear.” One scholar explains that *shama* means “to hear intelligently and attentively and respond appropriately,” not letting words go “in one ear and out the other.” In practice, if someone “heard” a command but did nothing, the Bible would consider that person as **not truly having shama’ed** at all.

This active, responsive aspect of *shama* is vividly illustrated by a modern Hebrew teacher’s anecdote: a student once asked how to tell someone to “obey” in Hebrew, and the instructor simply answered, “**Shema**.” In almost every case in Scripture where English translations say “obey,” the Hebrew verb behind it is *shama*. In other words, **biblical obedience is expressed as hearing**. When the Psalmist pleads, “O Lord, please hear my prayer,” he doesn’t mean God might be physically deaf; he’s asking God to **pay attention and act** on his plea. Likewise, when Jesus cries out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” He is urging people not just to audibly register His words, but to **take them to heart and live them out**.

Because *shama* carries the connotation of response, **real hearing requires a receptive heart**. The prophets often chastised Israel for having ears but not *shama*. “They have ears, but they’re not listening,” said Jeremiah 5:21 – the people heard the prophet’s words but failed to respond in repentance. This biblical insight challenges us: **Do we merely hear God’s words, or**

**do we listen with the intent to obey?** Theologically, *shama* teaches that *listening is a relational act*. It is the act of a servant or child who honors the speaker by trusting and obeying them. “Obedience is the supreme test of faith and reverence for God,” as one commentary notes; it is “the condition without which no right relation might be sustained to Yahweh.” In short, to *shama* God is to love and reverence Him enough to do what He says.

## “Shama” in Covenant Relationship (Deuteronomy 6:4–5 and Beyond)

The concept of *shama* lies at the heart of Israel’s covenant with God. Nowhere is this more evident than in **Deuteronomy 6:4–5**, the famous *Shema* passage: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD is one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” The opening injunction “**Hear (Shema), O Israel**” is far more than a call for sound waves to hit eardrums. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explains, “*Shema Yisrael does not mean ‘Hear, O Israel’ – it means something like: ‘Listen. Concentrate. Give the word of God your most focused attention. Strive to understand. Engage all your faculties, intellectual and emotional. Make His will your own...’*”. In other words, *shama* in the covenant context is a summons to **active, wholehearted listening** – the kind that leads to loving God with one’s entire being.

From the very start of Israel’s covenant story, *shama* is emphasized. When God gave the Law at Sinai, He set the terms by saying, “If you **fully obey** (literally ‘if listening you will listen,’ *shamoa tishma*) My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5). The double use of the verb (“listening listen”) intensifies it – **really listen closely**. And notice God’s parallel: “listening to My voice” = “keeping My covenant”. To God, a *listening people is an obedient people*. When the people later affirmed the covenant, they responded, “All that the LORD has said we will do and we will hear” (Exodus 24:7). At first glance, “do” and “hear” might seem out of order – shouldn’t it be “we will hear and then do”? In Hebrew understanding, however, this makes perfect sense: *to hear truly is to do*. The two verbs are virtually synonymous in that context. The people of Israel committed to obeying God’s words even before they heard all the details, implying complete trust. Jewish tradition has often applauded this response, seeing in it a model of faithful *shama* – a readiness to obey rooted in deep reverence for God.

The *Shema* of Deuteronomy 6:4 became the central **daily prayer of Israel**, precisely because it encapsulates the covenant relationship: *listening to God in loyalty and love*. By reciting “**Shema Yisrael...**” each day and then vowing to love God wholly, Israelites re-committed themselves to a lifestyle of attentive obedience. In Deuteronomy, the verb *shama* appears nearly 92 times, hammering home that covenant faithfulness looks like **hearing God’s voice and obeying His commands** at every turn. This theme continues through the prophets (who call the people to “hear the word of the LORD” and return to obedience) and into the New Covenant as well. Jesus identified “Hear, O Israel... love the Lord your God...” as the **greatest commandment**, affirming that the call to *shama* – to hear and respond to God in love – is at the core of a right relationship with Him (Mark 12:28–30).

In covenant terms, *shama* is an expression of **loyalty and trust**. When God's people *shama* Him, they acknowledge Him as their Lord. Thus, *shama* ties directly into the idea of **God's kingship and the people's submission**. One rabbinic commentator notes that the declaration "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one" in the Shema is Israel's pledge of allegiance to God's rule; to declare God's oneness *and* to "hear" Him is to agree to obey Him as the only God. Listening is covenant language. Conversely, refusing to *shama* God's voice is seen as **breaking faith**. For example, Jeremiah 7:23 summarizes God's covenant requirement: "*Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people.*" The word "obey" here again is *shama*. Failing to listen/obey severs the covenant bond, while listening maintains it.

## Richness of "Shama" – Rabbinical and Scholarly Insights

Both Jewish rabbis and biblical scholars have marveled at the richness of *shama*. The famous medieval commentator Rashi pointed out nuances in scriptural uses of *shama*, and modern teachers continue to draw lessons from it. As mentioned, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasized that Judaism is a "listening" faith, not a visually driven one: "*God is not something we see, but a voice we hear... There is no verb meaning 'to obey' in biblical Hebrew... The word the Torah uses is **lishmo'a**, Shema, 'hear.'*". Sacks outlines that *lishmo'a* (to *shama*) entails **listening intently, comprehending, taking to heart, and responding in deed** – all facets of a relational engagement with God's word. In rabbinic literature, *shama* can even mean "to gather information" or "to infer," showing how hearing implies actively processing and *absorbing* the message. No single English term carries all that weight, which is why understanding *shama* unlocks many Bible passages.

Christian scholars similarly highlight *shama's* breadth. Lois Tverberg, for example, notes that because Hebrew has fewer words than English, each word is "bulging with extra meanings." She writes: "*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.*". Her research showed that whenever we read "obey" in our English Old Testament, it's often *shama* in Hebrew. This insight can illuminate scripture: for instance, when the Book of Psalms begs, "*Lord, hear my prayer,*" it is a plea for God to intervene, not just listen passively. Understanding *shama* also explains why James 1:22 urges believers to be "*doers of the word, not hearers only.*" In Hebrew terms, "**hearers only**" is a **contradiction** – if one truly *heard* God's word, one would act on it!

Ancient Jewish prayers and commentary often link *shama* with action. The Mishnah (a core Rabbinic text) in one place comments on Deuteronomy 6:4, saying essentially: "*Accept the rule of God's kingdom in the words 'Hear O Israel.'*" To *accept* is to listen and obey. Moreover, the daily recitation of the Shema in Jewish tradition (morning and evening) is accompanied by a vow to "*do*" the commandments that follow (Deut 6:5-9, 11:13-21, etc.), reinforcing that *shama* leads to *shamar* (keeping/guarding the commandments – a related wordplay). The rabbis even told stories of Israel's willingness to *shama* God. One well-known teaching celebrates Israel's response of "we will do and we will hear" at Sinai, imagining God marveling that His people would commit to obey (*do*) even before *hearing* all the details – a supreme act of trust. Thus, in Jewish thought, *shama* carries the connotation of **faithful responsiveness**.

In summary, both Jewish and Christian commentators stress that *shama* is **richly layered**. It portrays hearing not as a passive act but as a dynamic interaction between God and humanity. God speaks, and the ideal response is *shama* – to listen with the ears, absorb with the mind and heart, and obey with the will. This one little Hebrew word therefore encapsulates the proper stance of a person before God: attentive, responsive, and obedient. It undergirds the covenant relationship (we relate to God by listening to Him), and it highlights the ethical call of scripture (to hear God is to obey Him).

## Teaching and Application – “Shama” in Our Lives (and Youth Ministry)

Because *shama* is such an actionable concept, it offers rich application for teaching and preaching – especially for youth. Here are some key points and examples that can help young people grasp the importance of **hearing and responding to God**:

- **Samuel’s Example – Listening to God’s Voice:** The story of young Samuel in 1 Samuel 3 is perfect for youth. Samuel was just a boy, yet he learned to say, “*Speak, Lord, your servant is listening.*” Emphasize how God spoke to Samuel personally. This shows that **age is no barrier** – God can call and use *anyone* who has a listening heart. In a lesson or sermon, you might recreate the scene (with one youth acting as Samuel) to draw kids in. Highlight Samuel’s words “*Your servant*” – he presented himself as God’s humble listener, ready to obey. Challenge youth: Are we **available** to God like that? Do we quiet ourselves to hear Him?
- **Hearing vs. Merely Hearing – Interactive Illustration:** To demonstrate the difference between just hearing sounds and *shama*-style listening, try an interactive exercise. For example, have someone give a set of instructions to a volunteer while the rest of the group chatters or is distracted. Then discuss: the volunteer *heard* the words, but could they carry them out? This can segue into a discussion that in our noisy world, we must **focus** to truly listen. You can even reference a relatable scenario: a parent telling children to come inside. The kids *hear* the call but keep playing – effectively, they didn’t *shama*. As one mother quipped, “My kids don’t have a hearing problem, they have a *shema*-ing problem!” The sound went into their ears, but it didn’t result in action. Likewise, we might hear Bible verses or sermons often, but *without obedience we haven’t really heard*. This point hits home with teens when tied to real-life behavior.
- **Obedience as the Proof of Listening:** Connect *shama* to everyday obedience. For youth, this can include listening to parents, teachers, or mentors – not just to avoid trouble, but as a way to practice *listening to God*. Ephesians 6:1 (“*Children, obey your parents...*”) can be linked to *shama*: learning to heed rightful authority is training in heeding God. You can illustrate that when we truly listen to someone, we respect them enough to respond. In the same way, **our obedience is the evidence that we’ve heard God**. Ask the youth: *How do we show God we’re listening?* Brainstorm practical examples: forgiving someone (because God’s Word says to), helping a person in need (responding to God’s call to love others), or spending time in prayer (listening for God’s guidance). Each act of obedience is like saying “Lord, I heard You.”
- **The Shema in Practice – Love God Fully:** If appropriate, introduce the Shema (Deut 6:4-5) to young people as a foundation. Many youth might not know that observant Jews recite

“Hear O Israel...” daily. Explain that this ancient practice is about **devotion**: it’s a pledge to listen to God and love Him above all else. For a Christian context, link this to Jesus’ teaching of the greatest commandment (Mark 12:29-30). A fun activity could be to teach them to say the first line in Hebrew (*Shema Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad*) and its meaning, then discuss how listening and loving go together. Encourage them that loving God with all their heart, soul, and strength means listening to His Word and putting it into action. Youth can be invited to make *Shama* their own prayer: “*Lord, help me listen to You today – and give me the courage to do what You say.*”

- **Reflection and Heart Check:** Finally, prompt personal reflection: *Am I a listener?* James 1:22 is a powerful verse to memorize here: “*Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.*” Ask the youth what it means to “deceive ourselves” by hearing but not doing (they’ll see that we might *think* we’re good with God because we know the right words, but our life shows otherwise). Perhaps close with a quiet prayer time where everyone asks God to speak to them and commits to *shama*. Remind them that God still “speaks” today primarily through Scripture – so *shama* can look like reading a Bible passage and then actually *applying it* that week. Even journaling what they sense God telling them and checking back on their follow-through can be a helpful exercise in active listening.

## Summary for Spiritual Reflection:

The word *shama* challenges all of us – youth and adults alike – to become **better listeners of God**. It’s a reminder that God doesn’t desire passive spectators who hear His words and nod; He seeks followers who hear and **obey**. In our personal devotions and our communities, we can ask: *Are we cultivating a “hearing heart” (lev shomea) like Solomon asked for (1 Kings 3:9)?* This means a heart attuned to God’s voice and ready to respond. The concept of *shama* also reassures us that when **God hears** us, He moves to help (as in Exodus 2:24, God “heard” Israel’s cries and acted). He models the very listening He asks of us.

In the busyness of life and the constant noise around us, *shama* invites us to **slow down and truly listen** – to Scripture, to the Holy Spirit’s promptings, to the wise counsel God places in our lives. For young people inundated with media and chatter, *shama* is a call to be different: to be attentive to God’s voice above all. It’s about listening *with faith* – hearing God’s word and saying, like Samuel, “*Here I am*” or “*Speak, Lord*”, and then living it out.

Ultimately, embracing *shama* leads to a more **responsive relationship with God**. Just as a healthy friendship or parent-child relationship is marked by listening and responding, our walk with God deepens when we “*hear, trust, and obey.*” So whether we’re teaching a Sunday school class, preaching a sermon, or quietly meditating on the Bible, the lesson of *shama* is profound: **Listening is love in action**. When we *shama* the Lord – actively listening and obediently responding – we demonstrate our love for Him and partake in the covenant fellowship He intends for His people.

**In summary**, *shama* (שָׁמָע) reminds us that *hearing* God is not a passive experience but an active commitment. It calls us to **listen deeply, understand truly, and respond faithfully**. As we cultivate this kind of listening in our lives and ministries, we mirror the great commandment

to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, and strength – for love itself is proven by our willingness to *hear His voice and obey*.

Sources:

- Biblical Hebrew Lexicon and Strong's Concordance for *shama* – outlines that it means “to hear, listen to, obey,” often “to hear intelligently (with attention, obedience)”.
- **Bible (1 Samuel 3:10)** – Samuel’s response “*Speak, for your servant is listening*” uses *shama*, indicating hearing + obedience.
- **BibleHub Commentary** – notes “*listen (shama) implies not just hearing but obeying and understanding.*”.
- **Precept Austin Word Study** – “to hear intelligently and attentively and respond appropriately”; in Scripture “to obey (*shama*) is better than sacrifice” (1 Sam 15:22).
- **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** – explains no Hebrew word for “obey,” so “*Shema*” means to hear and heed; “*Shema Yisrael*” really means “*Listen... give God your focused attention... strive to understand...*”.
- **Lois Tverberg (Our Rabbi Jesus)** – describes *shema* as “a whole spectrum... listening, taking heed, and responding with action”; notes Hebrew “we will do and we will hear” shows hearing = doing.
- **The Bible Project** – highlights that “*listening is basically the same as keeping the covenant... In ancient Hebrew, there is no separate word for obey... listening and doing are two sides of the same coin.*”.
- **Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (Shema)** – central covenant command to “*Hear, O Israel... love the Lord your God...*”, demonstrating that loving God starts with listening to Him. Rabbis and scholars concur that *shema* here implies an active, wholehearted engagement with God’s word.
- **Illustrations in Teaching** – Samuel’s story (1 Sam 3) and everyday examples (like children “not listening” to parents) reinforce that *shama* means hearing with the intent to obey, a crucial lesson for youth and adults alike.