

What does the Hebrew term ‘Shema’ mean?

“I will multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and will give to your offspring all these lands. And in your offspring all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because Abraham obeyed (shema) my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.” Genesis 26:4-5

The English word “obey” is nasty and polluted by our preconceived cultural connections to fundamentalism. Beneath this construction is our shameless scoffing towards authority. We hate to be told what to do, but even more, we hate to be told we *have to do* anything. “Obey” is not the *most accepted* word for *human consumption as a whole*.

We will often say we hate authoritarianism and totalitarian leaders who lord over us telling us to “obey”. But the truth is, we don’t hate authority at all, we love it all too much – we worship it. You see, we hate being told what to do, unless we’re the ones telling ourselves to do it. We don’t hate authority; we just love it so much we want it all for ourselves. This is why the word “obey” isn’t the cleanest English word. We don’t like it alone.

“¹⁶ Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷ But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,¹⁸ and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.” Romans 6:16-18

But the Hebrew word for “obey” isn’t as nasty as the English – it’s way cleaner in the Old Testament. In fact, the Hebrew is easier than English because, well, *there is no Hebrew word for “obey”*. That’s right, they actually do not have a word for it.

The *humanity* in me loves this, until I realize that (depending on your translation) the word “obey” shows up around 130 times in *our English translation of the Old Testament*. How can we put in a word in the Old Testament over 130 times that’s never even there in the original manuscript’s language?

Because the word in Hebrew we translate as “obey” is usually the term *shema*. This Hebrew word here is actually kind of famous and you may have heard it before. The term *shema* is actually more accurately translated as “listen” or “hear”. The famous “Shema” from **Deuteronomy 6** gets its name from this beautiful Hebrew word. The Shema begins, “**Hear**, O Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD, is one!” That, “Hear”, is the Hebrew term *shema*, and would be more accurately translated in English as ‘hear’, ‘listen’, ‘heed’, or ‘pay attention’.

But hearing isn’t obeying – so how did we get from “listen” to “obey”?

This is the beauty of an ancient culture and the gift of the Scriptures. The Jewish tradition and particularly the Old Testament culture, did not differentiate between “hearing” and “doing” or between “listening” and “obeying”. We came up with that.

We started to realize that you could hear and not do, that you could listen to words and not put them into action. We probably did this as human beings because we love finding shortcuts, taking the easy way out.

But God asks us to *shema*. God wants a heart where the listening is inextricably linked to the obeying.

And this goes deeper than just a Hebrew word study. When He walked the earth, the Lord Jesus closed his most famous sermon with these words:

*“Everyone then who **hears** these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who **hears** these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it”*

Matthew 7:24–27

To Jesus, listening without obedience is foolish. His brother, James, would tell us later:

*“**But be doers of the word, and not hearers only**, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a **hearer** of the word and **not a doer**, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. **But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing”***

James 1:22–25

The New Testament writers seem to be trying to explain to us the deep connection between **listening** and **obeying**. Maybe, then, **we are only truly listening to God when we are obeying Him.** This seems to be what it means to *Shema* (*Listen or Hear*). And anyways, isn't that a better word?

*– Adapted from a teaching of a Judean Rabbi
(New Testament references and commentary not in original teaching)*