Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Rough and somewhat literal translation

(1) And this is the commandment – the statutes and the ordinances (or judgments)A – which the LORDB your God commanded (me) to teach you to observe (or do) in the land which you are crossing (into) to possess (or occupy) it. (2) So that (or in order that) you and your child(ren) and your grandchild(ren)C will fear the LORD your God all the days of your life (and) keep all his statutes and his commandments which I am commanding you. And so that your days will be long. (3) And you will hearD O Israel and you will be careful to keep (them) so that it will (or may) go well for you and so that you will become many (or increase much) – as the LORD your God of your fathers (or forefathers) spoke to you – (in) a land flowing with milk and honey (or syrup).E

(4) HearF O Israel! The LORD our God the Lord is one.G (5) And you will love the Lord your God with all your heart (or mind)H and with all your soul (or breath)

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A Hebrew huqqot w-hamishpatim. There are several different vocabulary words for commandments, laws, statutes, “ordinances”, “testimonies”, and so on, and it is difficult to know exactly how to translate them in English. This is not the place for an excursus on the different terms and exactly what each expresses.

B Hebrew yhwh. Out of respect for the divine name Jewish people usually say adon(y) “my lord (or master)”. Usually translated in English with small caps as the LORD in order to distinguish it from adon “(the) lord”.

C Literally “your son/child and the son/children of your son/child”. The Greek and Latin translations of the Old Testament read these as plural.

D Or “hear (O Israel)”. The verb is actually a future tense-form (the so-called waw-reversive). Just like “you will do this” has imperatival force in English the future can have imperatival force in Hebrew. Compare “hear (O Israel)” in verse 4 which is a true imperative form. Compare also to “you will (not) (thou shalt [not])” in the Ten Commandments. The future is another way to express a command.

E If the English seems awkward it is largely because the Hebrew has parenthetic and dependent clauses that are difficult to render with one smooth sentence in English. Hebrew dbash is often translated “honey” but might be date syrup rather than honey from bees.

F What is with the biG letterS? Actually in the Hebrew text the last letter of the first word and the last letter of the last word are unusually large. This happens occasionally in the Hebrew Bible – letters that look a little different for some reason (here almost certainly to emphasize the importance of this verse).

G An extremely important verse in the Old Testament and in Judaism. Known as the Shma or Shema (from Hebrew shma “hear!”) it “encapsulates the monotheistic essence of Judaism” and is central to the morning and evening Jewish prayer services. Similar to how central “Jesus is lord” is to Christian faith. It also plays a role in the doctrine of the Trinity. If the Father and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are “God” but God is one not three then…?
and with all your strength. (6) And these words which I am commanding you today will be on your heart (or mind). (7) And you will teach (or repeat) them to your children and you will speak of them (or talk about them) when you are at home and when you walk on the road and when you lie down and when you get up. (8) And you will bind them as a sign on your hand(s) and they will be as a frontlet between your eyes. (9) And you will write them on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates.

Shema Yisrael = Hear O Israel!

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1 Hebrew lebab often translated “heart” but is not the seat of emotion (which is how we often use the word in English) but rather “to the inner person, the seat of understanding, knowledge, and will”. Early Christian writers understand labab to be closer to what we mean by “mind” in English. To convey what three words in Hebrew express the New Testament has to use four Greek words (“heart, soul, mind, strength”) in Mark 12:30 et passim.

1 Hebrew totafot. In Orthodox Judaism one of two tefillin or “phylacteries” – one for the head and one for the hand – that contain small scrolls with verses of Scripture. Orthodox Judaism understands totafot here as the tefillah (singular) for the head (or uses the tefillah for the head to fulfill this commandment).

1 Hebrew mezuzot(w). Jewish people regularly place “mezuzot” (plural) – small containers with verses of Scripture – on the doorposts of their homes. I have seen friends touch the mezuzah (singular) with their right hand and then lightly kiss their fingertips.