

Parshas Ki Sisa

Love in a Knot

The *eigel* and the breaking of *luchos* after Moshe came down from the mountain. Then Moshe's lengthy and eloquent prayer that he presented to Hashem on behalf of the Jews, before he went back up to the mountain for forty days. In that discussion Hashem revealed to Moshe the 13 *midos* of *rachamim*. We still use those *midos* to request atonement on Yom Kippur. Hashem eventually accepted the petition and gave us a second set of *luchos*, and we worked together to reestablish our relationship with Hashem.

Many passages here require explanation and elucidation.

One such passage. A very puzzling pasuk.

Moshe is pleading with Hashem. Eventually he succeeds to convince Hashem to agree to a reconciliation with the Jewish people. Then Moshe says, *Im lo matzasi chen beneicha... hodieini na es drachecha, v'eida'acha, lmaan emtza chen beinecha*. "If I have found favor in your eyes tell me of your ways, and I will know You so that I will find favor in Your eyes." God responds, *matzasa chen b'einay v'eidacha b'shem*. "You have found favor in my eyes and I will let you know my name." Moshe says *hodieina na es drachecha*. "Let me know your glory." Hashem says "I will pass my goodness in front of you I will call out the name of God for you and I shall be gracious when I will be gracious and have mercy when I shall have mercy." Hashem continues with a limitation of sorts. "You cannot see my face, for a person cannot see my face and live." Hashem says further, "There is a place with me, You will stand on the rock. When my honor will pass, I will place you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with my hand until I pass. I will remove my hand and you will see my back but my face shall not be seen."

Shem Mishmuel explains this mysterious passage. What is the back of Hashem that Moshe was privileged to see? It seems to be something about Hashem that Moshe was able to perceive. However, the perception that Hashem entitled Moshe to was limited to the back, he was not privileged to see the face.

Rashi says the back of Hashem refers to the knot of the *tfillin*. What are *tfillin*? Jewish men wear *tfillin* on our head and arm. The *tfillin* of the head consists of a box with four compartments, attached to straps. In the back of the head, the straps are tied in a special knot on the back of the neck. Moshe was privileged to see that knot, which Hashem, so to speak, has on the back of His neck. However, Moshe was not privileged to see the front of the *tfillin* of Hashem.

This is a very difficult passage, and Rashi's explanation is mystifying. As believing Jews, we reject completely any kind of bodily form or physicality ascribed to Hashem. God is not a body, as Rambam rules in our Thirteen Fundamental Tenets of Judaism. He cannot even be described or understood in any corporeal way. We cannot really say that God has a face or a back or *tfillin* on his "head." All of this is a *mashal*, an allegory to present a certain concept and must be understood in an abstract and intellectual way.

For further study of the Torah's use of physical description for the non physical God, you should look into Moreh Nevuchim. The Rambam analyzes many instances of the Tanach's usage of physical descriptions God and he explains their abstract meanings.

What is the meaning of the knot of Hashem's *tfillin*? Shem Mishmuel cites his father the avnei Nezer.

The word *tfillin* is a difficult word in Hebrew. Breishis 48. *Re'o fanecha lo filalti*. When Yaakov and Yosef were finally reunited in Egypt after being separated for 22 years, Yaakov said to Yosef, "I never imagined I would see you and now Hashem has shown me your children also." The word *palal* refers to thinking. Somehow, the *tfillin* represent Jewish thought. When we speak of Hashem's *tfillin* we are speaking of Hashem's thought. We know from *halacha* that when a Jew wears *tfillin* he must have total concentration on them. When a Jew is wearing *tfillin* his mind must be focused on holiness, and he cannot be distracted at all. He can think about the meaning and message of the *parshiyos* of the *tfillin*. He can think of Hashem's existence, that He is one. He can think of Torah Rashi and that he must teach his children the Torah, do all the *mitzvos* and that Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim so that we would do his *mitzvos*. We have to keep this in mind while we are wearing our *tfillin*. All of these lofty and fundamental principles are written in the *parshiyos* in our *tfillin*. The fundamentals of Judaism are in the *tfillin* that we wear.

Moshe was connected to Hashem in the most incredible way more than any human being who ever lived. Moshe, more than anyone else, had a connection to *tfillin*. In other words, Moshe had the most profound connection to Hashem in thought.

There is an amazing gemara in Brachos 6a. The gemara raises several questions. Just as we wear *tfillin* so Hashem wears *tfillin*. What is written in the *tfillin* of the Master of the universe? The gemara explains remarkably: In our *tfillin*, the *parshiyos* speak of the exodus from Egypt, that Hashem is one, our commitment to Torah and His *mitzvos*. They are about Hashem's greatness and its impact on us.

In Hashem's *tfillin*, the *parshiyos* speak of Klal Yisrael's uniqueness. *Mi k'amcha Yisrael goy echad ba'aretz. U'mi goy gadol, Ashrecha yisrael*. The *parshiyos* discuss that Bnei Yisrael have this connection with the Almighty, and that Hashem has not made a similar connection with any other nation. These are the ideas in Hashem's *tfillin*. They focus on the greatness of the Jewish people and His loyalty to them. This is a unique and exclusive connection much like the connection between husband and wife.

This is the message of the *tfillin* that God wears. We understand that the idea of *tfillin* should not be taken as something physical, but rather in an abstract and sophisticated way. If we speak of God's thinking, this means that God thinks of Israel all the time. He knows that Israel is special and that He has created a special relationship with Israel. In the knot of Hashem's *tfillin*, we discern the concept of being bound together with a connection that can never be broken.

The Hebrew word for knot is *keshet*. If we rearrange the letters, they can also spell *sheker*, falsehood. The antonym has the same letters. *Keshet* and *sheker* are opposites. Falsehood has no lasting existence, as the gemara says. The very letters don't have legs to stand on. *Sheker* cannot stand forever, it will ultimately fall apart. We see this in world affairs over and over. Even the most powerful empires, like the Soviet Union, fell apart because they were based on falsehood. They said they believed in the collective and in helping everyone. But they really wanted power for themselves. Nazi Germany also said they wanted to make the world a better place. But they used this dream as an excuse to destroy the world in a quest for dominion over everyone. Hashem does not allow these falsehoods to exist.

The opposite of *sheker* can be found in the knot of the connection between Hashem and Am Yisrael.

We Jews wear *tfillin*. *Tfillin* encapsulate our thoughts about Hashem. Our beliefs comprise a stable system of ideas. It is unchanging, and based on eternal loyalty. *V'ahavta es Hashem elokecha*. "You should love God with all your soul, all your heart, and all your might." Themishna in Brachos

expounds: With every possible *mida* and situation that Hashem sends to you, you should thank Him and love Him. Whether he sends you rewards or punishment, you should love Him. Dovid wrote in Thillim, "I lift up cup of salvation to find God amid my suffering." In chapter 56 he writes, "*B'elokim ahalel davar b'Hashem ahalel davar.*" The Yerushalmi teaches that the name Elokim refers to *midas hadin* and the name of *Havaya* refers to *midas harachamim*. Either way, whether I encounter Hashem's *midas hadin* or His *midas harachamim, ahalel davar*; I will praise Him. I will praise Him for both good and bad that comes my way, because I understand that all God does for me is ultimately for the best.

When the Jewish people unfortunately sin against Hashem, our reaction is to do *tshuva* and come closer to Hashem. Yeshaya 27:15 Just as a woman giving birth screams in pain, the Jewish people scream in pain from their suffering. We are screaming in front of God. Radak explains the analogy to the laboring woman. Even though her husband is the cause of her pain, her scream does not express hatred for him. Instead, during this moment of great pain she reaches out to her husband asking him for support. As the Jewish people suffer we call out to our husband and master, God Almighty, to express His love for us. We know it is there. The Jewish nation has been most loyal to its God. We know Hashem is always for us, even amid our suffering. Like a father has mercy on a child Hashem has mercy on us. We have a *kesher*, we are bound in an unbreakable knot of love to Hashem. This applies in all situations and in all places and countries, in good times and especially in bad times.

B. Contemporary manifestations of our love for Hashem

In our own times, we have witnessed the loyalty and love of Am Yisrael for Hashem. No other nation ever suffered so much in such little time as we did in the Holocaust. After that horrendous episode the Jewish people returned to Torah and *mitzvos* with enthusiasm that hasn't been seen in many years. Today in the State of Israel there are many thousands of people learning Torah day and night. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish children are studying more Torah than any time in the last thousand years. *Tshuva* is stronger than ever. There are more Jewish books being published now than ever before. This is the Jewish response to the Holocaust.

C. Parents Never Abandon Their Children

We think of the *tfillin* of Hashem. Gemara in Yoma 57 says cites the *pasuk* in Vayikra 16. *Ani Hashem hashochen itam b'soch tumosam*. Even when they are *tamei*, Hashem rests among the Bnei Yisrael.

In the Torah we are called servants of God. The Torah also refers to us as sons of Hashem. *Banim atem. Avadai heim*. Shem Mishmuel explains the difference between a servant and child. If a servant misbehaves or doesn't perform his job he may be sent away or sold to someone else. A child, though, is never abandoned by his parents, even the worst child. Only crazy people drive away their children. Loyal, healthy, parents keep their connection with their children.

I have visited many Jewish prisoners. I have not yet found a prisoner who was abandoned by his parents. The parents are totally loyal to them. They often believe that their son is innocent, and even if they do think he is guilty they believe in rehabilitation. This is like the relationship of God to Israel. When Bnei Yisrael violate the covenant and sin, Hashem maintains his dedication to us. He may punish us, but He will not abandon us.

This is the mistake that Christianity and Islam make. They mistook the punishments that came to Am Yisrael as abandonment. Shlomo Hamelech wrote in Mishlei, "He who spares the rod hates his child."

You have to punish a child if he does bad things. Otherwise, he will grow to be a criminal. He has to learn law and order. Punishment doesn't mean, though, that you hate him. A parent should express his love through punishment of his child. If you don't punish your child, you are not loving him properly. A parent who never punishes his child has a distorted view of love. A relationship to a child requires both *chesed* and *din*, kindness and justice.

Hashem loves us absolutely and provides for us. Sometimes, though, he must punish us, like a loving parent who must punish his child. Someone who never punishes his child is ruining the child. Someone doesn't hug or kiss his child is also ruining the child. We need a good balance between *chesed* and *din*.

Hashem is the ultimate parent for us Jewish children. When the *chassidische rebbes* talk about the Jewish people, they refer to them as Jewish children. We are the children of Hashem. He is with us even when we are defiled. This is why the miracles of his divine grace continuously reoccur for the Jewish people. After the Holocaust he gathered up the ashes, bringing back his children to the land of Israel. He gave us the city of Yerushalayim. The State of Israel is a wonder of the world, in its accomplishments and beauty. The land today is flowering. Hashem is with us despite our failings. He is loyal to us as his children absolutely. He will never abandon us. He cannot abandon His children, like any normal parents who will not abandon his child no matter what the child has done.

D. Double Dedication

This is the *kesher*, the unbreakable knot of God's *tfillin*. *Mi k'amcha Yisrael goy echad ba'aretz*. At Har Sinai we said *naaseh vnishma*, proclaiming our unwavering dedication to Hashem. We accepted the blessings and curses of the Torah. What other nation could ever endure our suffering: exiles, pogroms Inquisition and Holocaust, and still remain loyal to its father in heaven like we do? We are committed absolutely to Torah. We accept the blessings, and God forbid, the curse. We are His children and He is our God and Father in heaven.

His *tfillin* proclaim the uniqueness of the Jewish people, the only people who are ready and willing to accept all the conditions of the Torah with no changes. We will accede to every demand of God in the Torah, from the smallest law of Shabbos to living faithfully as a Jew in an often hostile non Jewish world. We will remain loyal to Him and we know He will remain loyal to us even though we have our failings. This is the idea of the knot of Hashem's *tfillin*.

D. Moshe Rabbeinu's Astounding Dedication

Why was Moshe Rabbeinu the privileged one to first understand this irrevocable connection between Hashem and Israel? Shem Mishmuel explains Moshe Rabbeinu's role at a very critical moment, at the time of the golden calf. He came down from the mountain holding the tablets. He saw the calf and knew this was a terrible sin of Israel. He had no knowledge of the *kesher* at the time. He thought that, God forbid, the Almighty might abandon the people and wipe them out. The midrash explains Moshe's dramatically astounding thought process. "I will break the tablets and I will be wiped out. I will sin too because of my loyalty to my people. These are my brothers and sisters and my children. If they will be destroyed, I will be destroyed with them." Moshe, our teacher, was loyal to his followers, even when disaster came. "I will not save myself. I will go down together with my followers."

How many great rabbis could have left Europe during the Holocaust but instead devotedly chose not abandon their flock? How many great rabbis are sitting in the cities of Israel as rockets are launched at them, and they say I will stay here I will not abandon my flock? The rabbis of Israel have amazing

dedication, which they learned from Moshe.

When God saw this, He said, “*Yasher koach asher shibarta.*” I congratulate you that you broke the tablets. You are like Me. You are loyal to our children even when they betray us. You broke the tablets and I will make a reconciliation with them. Now I will teach you the secret of the *kesher* of my *tfillin*, the knot that binds Me to Israel. Moshe deserved this gift because of his self-sacrifice, *mesirus nefesh*, for the Jewish people.

Recognizing Our Failing

We know how much we have failed. We have failed the Almighty. We have not been loyal. Our heart breaks when we think about this. But We know that His loyalty is greater than our disloyalty. He gives us the strength to repent and come back. What a wonderful gift, to know that I am a child of the almighty God, to feel His loving caress. This is a special feeling of being a child of Israel, a child of the Almighty, our father in heaven.

Shem Mishmuel draws a connection to Shabbos. Shabbos is the day on which we are so close with our Father. The closeness of this relationship outmatches any other. It is an exclusive relationship. On Friday night, we even tell the angels *tzeischem l'shalom*, goodbye. On Shabbos we don't have angels. We only have angels during the week. On Shabbos we ask the *malachim* leave peacefully. We are now with the Almighty. We are alone with our beloved father on Shabbos.

F. Lessons

How important a lesson for us. We live in a complex time. Despite the blessing of Israel, we are being very strongly tested. Our enemies are firing rockets at us. We have other challenges as well. We must admit that we are not perfect. We accept Hashem's stick, and teachings as well as His loving caress. We must remember that the stick is also loving. It is important to always remember that whatever is happening, Hashem our father in heaven is caring for us and protecting us.

How can anybody deny the amazing miracle of the existence of the Jewish people, especially after the whole continent of Europe was arrayed against us to destroy us? How do we survive in the State of Israel, with hundreds of thousands of enemies surrounding us, armed and ready to perpetrate suicide attacks? Yet Israel survives, and blooms. It is becoming stronger in Torah and *mitzvos* and *avoda*. This is the miracle of God's hand protecting us, despite the millions of people who are against Jewish survival. We have survived them all: Rome Greece, Persia, Soviet Russia, the Nazis. We will survive it all, but not because we are strong. We are very weak, but God is very strong and He protects us.

We ponder the wonder of Jewish survival. We take encouragement and pray for the day when we have only goodness. The curses will end. We will have atoned for our sins and we will have just the blessings. We trust in our father in Heaven, that the day of the coming of our *mashiach* will soon arrive. The Jewish people will gather the blessings of its loyalty to Hashem, and the *kesher* of its *tfillin*. And we will see the full expression of His loyalty to us, as expressed by the *kesher* of his *tfillin*.