

KI SISA
LOVE IN A KNOT

A

Moshe's Vision of the Back

The *parsha* tells the tragic story of the *eigel* and the breaking of the *luchos* after Moshe came down from Har Sinai. This is followed by Moshe's lengthy and eloquent prayer to Hashem on behalf of the Jews before he returned to the mountaintop for an additional forty days. In that discussion, Hashem revealed to Moshe the 13 *middos* of *rachamim*. We still use these *middos* to request atonement on Yom Kippur. Hashem eventually accepted Moshe's 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 is particularly puzzling.

Moshe further requests, "*Har'eini na es kevodecha*. Show me Your glory" (Shemos 33:18). Hashem responds, "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 shall have mercy when I will have mercy" (ibid. 19). Hashem continues with a limitation of sorts: "You cannot see My face, for a person cannot see My face and live" (ibid. 20). Hashem says further, "There is a place with Me, and 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” (ibid. 21-23).

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, but that perception was limited to the back. Moshe was not privileged to see the face.

What is the “back of Hashem” to which the *pasuk* here refers? Rashi says the back of Hashem refers to the knot of Hashem’s *tefillin shel rosh*. The *tefillin shel rosh* consist 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 the knot that Hashem has on the back of His neck, as it were. However, Moshe was not privileged to see the front of the *tefillin* of Hashem.

B

The *Tefillin* Knot

This is a very difficult passage, and Rashi’s explanation is mystifying. As believing Jews, we completely reject any kind of bodily form or physicality ascribed to Hashem. God is not a body, as Rambam rules in his Thirteen Fundamental Tenets of Judaism. He cannot be described or understood in any corporeal way. We cannot really say that God has a face or a back or *tefillin* 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 descriptions for the non-physical God, you should look in the Moreh Nevuchim. There, the Rambam analyzes many instances of Tanach’s usage of physical descriptions of God and explains their abstract meanings. We will use a similar approach here.

What is the meaning of the knot of Hashem’s *tefillin*? The Shem Mishmuel cites his father, the Avnei Neizer. The word

tefillin is a difficult word in Hebrew. In Bereishis 48:11, the Torah uses a similar word. When Yaakov and Yosef were finally reunited in Egypt after being separated for twenty-two years, Yaakov said to Yosef, “*Re’o fanecha lo filalti*, I never thought I would see you.” The root *palal* refers to thought. Somehow, the *tefillin* represent Jewish thought. When we speak of Hashem’s *tefillin*, we are speaking of Hashem’s thoughts. We know from *halacha* that when a Jew wears *tefillin*, he must have total concentration. His mind must be focused on holiness, and he cannot be distracted at all. He should think about the meaning and message of the *parshiyos* of the *tefillin*, of Hashem’s existence—that He is one. He should think of Torah and that he must teach his children the Torah. He should think that he must do all the *mitzvos* and that Hashem took us out of Egypt so that we would do His *mitzvos*. All of these lofty and fundamental principles are written in the *parshiyos* of our *tefillin*.

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

C

What Is Written in Hashem’s *Tefillin*?

There is an amazing Gemara (Brachos 6a) that asks: What is written in Hashem’s *tefillin*? The Gemara explains remarkably: In our *tefillin*, the *parshiyos* speak of the exodus from Egypt, that Hashem is one, of our commitment to Torah and *mitzvos*. They are focused on Hashem’s greatness and its impact on us.

On the other hand, in Hashem’s *tefillin*, the *parshiyos* speak of the uniqueness of the Jewish People. “*Mi k’amcha Yisrael goy echad ba’aretz*” (Shmuel II 7:23), “*U’mi goy gadol*” (Devarim 4:8), and “*Ashrecha Yisrael*” (Devarim 33:29). These *parshiyos* discuss the unique relationship that the Jewish People have with the Almighty

and that Hashem has not made a similar connection with any other nation. These are the basic ideas contained in Hashem's *tefillin*. They focus on the greatness of the Jewish People and on God's loyalty to them. This is a unique and exclusive connection, much like the connection between a husband and wife.

This is the message of the *tefillin* that Hashem wears. We now understand that the idea of *tefillin* 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 Bnei Yisrael are special and that He has created a special relationship with them. In the knot of Hashem's *tefillin*, we discern the concept of being bound together with an unbreakable connection.

D

Falsehood Doesn't Last

The Hebrew word for knot is *kesher*. If we rearrange the letters, they can also spell *sheker*, falsehood. The antonym has the same letters; *kesher* and *sheker* are opposites. Falsehood has no lasting existence, as the Gemara says (Shabbos 104a). The very letters don't have legs to stand on; each Hebrew letter in the word *sheker* rests on only one point. *Sheker* cannot stand forever. It will ultimately fall apart. We see this over and over in world affairs. 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 really, they wanted power for themselves. Nazi Germany also said it wanted to make the world a better place. But it used this dream as an excuse to destroy the world in a quest for dominion over everyone else. Hashem does not allow these falsehoods to exist for too long.

Eternal Loyalty

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

We Jews wear *tefillin*. *Tefillin* encapsulate our thoughts about Hashem. Our beliefs comprise a stable system of ideas. It is unchanging; it is based on eternal loyalty. *V'ahavta es Hashem elokecha b'chol levavecha uv'chol nafsh'cha uv'chol m'odecha*. You should love God with all your soul, heart, and might" (Devarim 6:5). The Mishnah in Brachos (54a) explains that "with all your might" means, "with every possible *midda* 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.

"I lift up a cup of salvation to find God amid my suffering," Dovid Hamelech said. The *pasuk* states, "*B'Elokim ahaleil davar ba'Hashem ahaleil davar*" (Tehillim 56:11). The Yerushalmi (Brachos 9:5) teaches that the name Elokim refers to *middas hadin*, Divine justice, and the name of *Havaya* refers to *middas harachamim*, Divine mercy. Either way, whether I encounter Hashem's justice or His mercy, *ahaleil 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 *teshuva* and come closer to Him. The *pasuk* says that just as a woman giving birth screams in pain, the Jewish People scream in pain from their suffering (Yeshaya 26:17). 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 his support. As the Jewish People suffer, we call out to our husband and master, God Almighty. We know His love is there. The Jewish nation has been most loyal to its God. We know Hashem

is always there for us, even amidst our suffering. As a father has mercy on a child, Hashem has mercy on us. We have a *keshet*, we are bound in an unbreakable knot of love to Hashem. This applies in all situations and places and countries, in good times and in bad times. It is our loyal, true commitment to Him. It is our *tefillin*.

F

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 so 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 Israel, there are many thousands of people learning Torah day and night. Hundreds of thousands of Jewish children are studying more Torah than at any time in the last thousand years. *Teshuva* is stronger than ever. There are more Jewish books being published now than ever before. This is the Jewish response to the Holocaust. This demonstrates our unbreakable bond to Hashem, the *keshet* of our *tefillin*.

G

Parents Never Abandon Their Children

Think of Hashem's *tefillin*. The Gemara (Yoma 57a) cites the *pasuk*, "*Hashochein itam b'soch tumosam*" (Vayikra 16:16), and interprets it to mean that even when the Jews are *tamei* (impure), Hashem dwells among them.

In the Torah, we are called servants of God, "*avaday heim*" (Vayikra 25:42). The Torah also refers to us as children of Hashem,

“*banim atem*” (Devarim 14:1). The Shem Mishmuel explains the difference between a servant and a child. If a servant misbehaves or doesn’t perform his job properly, he may be sent away or sold to someone else. A child, though, is never abandoned by his or her parents. Only crazy people drive away their own children. Loyal, normal parents always keep their connection with their children.

I have visited Jewish prisoners. I have not yet found a prisoner who was abandoned by his parents. The parents are totally loyal to their child. They often believe that their son is innocent, and even if they do think he is guilty, they believe in his 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 His *tefillin*.

This is the mistake that both Christianity and Islam made. They mistook the punishments that came to Am Yisrael as abandonment. The *pasuk* states, “He who spares the rod hates his child” (Mishlei 13:24). You have to punish a child if he does bad things. Otherwise, he will grow up to be a criminal. He has to learn law and order. But punishment doesn’t mean that you hate him. Actually, a parent should express his love through punishment. 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 must punish his child. Someone who never punishes his child is ruining the child. Someone who doesn’t hug or kiss his child is also ruining the child. We need a proper balance between *chesed* and *din* with our own children.

Hashem is the ultimate parent for us, His 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 recur for the Jewish People. After the Holocaust, He gathered up the ashes and brought His children back 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 absolutely loyal to us as His children. He will never abandon His children, just like any normal parent will never abandon his child, no matter what the child has done.

H

Double Dedication

This is the *kesher*, the unbreakable knot of God's *tefillin*. "*Mi k'am-cha Yisrael goy echad ba'aretz*." This is God's loyalty to us. At Har Sinai we said "*na'aseh v'nishma*" (Shemos 24:7), proclaiming our unwavering dedication to Hashem. We accepted the blessings and curses of the Torah. Which other nation could endure our suffering—exiles, pogroms, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust—and still remain loyal to its Father in heaven like we have done? We are totally committed to His Torah. We accept the blessings and (God forbid) the curses. We are His children, and He is our God and Father in heaven.

His *tefillin* proclaim the uniqueness of the Jewish People, the only people who are ready and willing to accept all of 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 a hostile non-Jewish world. We will remain loyal to Him, and we know that He will remain loyal to us even though we have our failings.

Moshe Rabbeinu's Astounding Dedication

Why was Moshe Rabbeinu the privileged one to first understand this irrevocable connection between Hashem and Israel? The 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 that Jews had committed a terrible sin. He had no knowledge of the *kesher* at the time. He thought that Hashem might abandon the Jewish People and wipe them out (God forbid). The Midrash explains Moshe's dramatically astounding thought process. "I will break the tablets and I will also be wiped out. I, too, will sin 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 was loyal to his people, even when disaster struck. "I will not save myself. I will go down together with them."

How many great rabbis could have left Europe during the Holocaust but instead chose not to abandon their flocks? How many great rabbis are sitting in the cities of Israel as rockets are launched at them and say, "I will stay here. I will not abandon my flock"? The rabbis of Israel have amazing dedication, which they have learned from Moshe Rabbeinu.

When God saw this, He said, "*Yasher kochacha she'shibarta*. I congratulate you that you broke the tablets. You are like Me. You are loyal to our children even when they betray us. We will be reconciled with them. Now, I will teach you the secret of the *kesher* of my *tefillin*, the knot that binds Me to Israel."

Moshe deserved this gift because of his self-sacrifice for the Jewish People.

J

Recognizing Our Failings

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 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.

The Shem Mishmuel draws a connection to Shabbos. Shabbos is the day on which we are so close with our Father. The closeness of this exclusive relationship outdoes any other. On Friday night, we even tell the angels, “*tzeischem l’shalom*,” goodbye—we are now with Hashem alone.

K

Lessons

How important a lesson for us. We live in a very complex and stressful time. Despite the blessings of Israel, we are being very strongly tested. Our enemies are firing rockets at us and stabbing us with knives. We have other challenges as well. We must admit that we are not perfect. We do accept Hashem’s rod as well as His loving caress. We must remember that the rod is also an expression of love. It is important to always remember that, whatever is happening, Hashem—our Father in heaven—is caring for 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 millions of enemies surrounding us, armed and ready to attack? Yet Israel survives and thrives. It is becoming

stronger daily in Torah, *mitzvos*, and *avoda*. This is the miracle of God's hand protecting us despite the hordes of people who are against Jewish survival. We have survived them all: Rome, Greece, Persia, Soviet Russia, and the Nazis. We will continue to 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 and the curses will end. We trust in our Father in Heaven and that *mashiach* will soon arrive. The Jewish People will reap the fruits of its loyalty to Hashem and the *kesher* of its *tefillin*. And we will see the full expression of His loyalty to us, as expressed by the *kesher* of His *tefillin*.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What is the meaning of the *kesher* of the *tefillin* in general?
2. What is the meaning of the *kesher* of Hashem's *tefillin*?
3. What is the meaning of the *kesher* of our *tefillin*?
4. Why did Moshe break the *luchos* and why did Hashem react to it the way He did?

EXERCISES

1. Make a list of five demonstrations of Hashem's love for the Jewish People.
2. Make a list of five demonstrations of the Jewish People's loyalty to Him.
3. Which relationship is the source of divine loyalty to the Jewish People and vice versa?

