

HASHEM'S TRUE HONOR

by Nechama Stampler

Hashem's True Honor¹

Moshe said, "Please show me Your Honor." Hashem said, "I will pass all my good before you... You will see My back, but My face shall not be seen."

Rashi: He showed Moshe the knot of His tefillin.

Maharal: We will be best served by considering some introductory remarks before analyzing Rashi's comment, which is taken from Chazal. They will help you to get past any hesitations you may feel when you come across passages similar to this, in which the message seems inscrutable, and altogether foreign to the plain sense of a verse.

You must realize that no one took the words of Torah more seriously than Chazal did. Their approach to any pasuk is its genuine peshat, to the exclusion of the approaches taken by others. Only Chazal combine the two elements necessary to explicate Divine text: meticulous attention to the words, plus full appreciation of their depth. Others, removed from true wisdom, will utterly reject their words as hopelessly estranged from the text. Those who comprehend the Torah's wisdom are, to the contrary, astounded by Chazal's facility in conveying an accurate sense of the meaning resident in the words.

Moshe did not ask to "see" G-d, which of course is an impossibility. Since He lacks any physical characteristics, there is nothing to see. Similarly, he did not ask to fully comprehend what Hashem is, which is also impossible for a human being. Rather, he asked Hashem to show him His kavod, His honor. This is quite different from His essence. His honor, in this context, means a full understanding of His loftiness, of the grandeur of His elevated place, of the distance between Him and our puny understanding.

You probably already know that "tefillin" is synonymous with splendor, honor, glory. "Don your headgear of splendor" ² refers to tefillin, in the view of Chazal. Similarly, looking at the Megilah's description of the reaction of the Jews to their miraculous deliverance in the days of Mordechai and Esther - "to the Jews there was light and happiness, joy and honor" ³ - Chazal understood the final element of that set to mean tefillin.

Hashem's response to Moshe's request is that this, too, was impossible. "My face will not be seen."

Engaging Hashem frontally, so to speak, means understanding His honor, or the extent to which He is different from everything else. That "honor" is symbolized by the tefillin, as we wrote above. The knot of the head tefillin sits at the back of the head, or at a place distant from the face. We can often recognize people from behind, but our identification of them is never as certain as it is when looking at someone's face. Similarly, Hashem told Moshe that he could (and would) be given some understanding of His honor, but not the clear, unambiguous understanding that he asked for. Moshe would have to content himself with the best that a human being could hope to achieve. He would recognize Hashem's loftiness relative to all else in the universe, but not in the complete sense that could be called Hashem's tefillin, His true honor. Moshe would see (and comprehend) only in a somewhat remote sense.

Pressing on even deeper, we realize that the significance of the knot is that it ties and fixes the tefillin to its wearer. Applied to Hashem's honor, we grasp that honor that stays bound to its wearer cannot be honor in its true fullness. If honor is the revelation of inner meaning, it is present only when that honor becomes observable to others! Yeshaya's oft-quoted take on Hashem's honor is that it "the whole world is filled" ⁴ with it. This does not mean that everyone and everything on earth comprehends Him and values Him for what He is. We know that this is not the case. Yeshaya does mean that His honor - understanding His lofty station - is not bound so closely to Him that it can be accessed only in special proximity to Him. To the contrary. The world is saturated with hints of the difference between the mundane and the Divine. His honor truly spills over to every nook and cranny of creation, all of which refracts His greatness.

Understanding all of this honor, however, is still beyond the ability of a single person - even Moshe. He would be given instruction in a more limited form of honor - one held "closer" to Hashem, bound to Him like the knot of tefillin holds it close to the body of the wearer. This understanding of His honor is more limited, less accessible than unbound honor. The latter, the tefillin themselves, is pervasive and universal - the presence of Elokus in everything that is so remarkable, that it would give us a much better understanding of His greatness - were we only to be able to see it. This matter is a very deep topic. What we can grasp of it, I have hinted here.

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1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Shemos 33:23; Be'er HaGolah, 3rd Be'er;
 2. Yechezkel 24:17
 3. Esther 8:16
 4. Yeshaya 6:3
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