

TAKING THE TEFILLIN TEST

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

"Hear, O Israel, Hashem is our G-d; Hashem, the One and Only... And these words, that I command you today, shall be upon your heart... Bind them as a sign upon your arm, and let them be a 'totafos' between your eyes." [6:4-8]

One of the Jew's most basic expressions of faith is reading the Shema twice daily, once when we rise, and once before we lay down. The Shema, then, is apparently not the place for "fringe" mitzvos or time-specific messages. Rather, one would rightly assume that each word of the Shema contains some timeless lesson and fundamental aspect of Judaism. Why, then, does the verse stress that, "these words, that I command you today, shall be upon your heart?" And in what way is the donning of tefillin such a basic tenet of Judaism - to the extent that it merits appearing twice in the Shema, once here, and once in the second parsha (section)? [Devarim 11:18]

Rashi comments on the words, "that I command you today,":

"They [the mitzvos] should not be in your eyes like an old statute, which has ceased to have meaning and importance. Rather, they should be like a new law - which everyone is anxious to study and perform."

"Today" in the verse does not refer to the day on which the parsha (section) of the Shema was given. After all, the process of giving the Torah had been an ongoing project over the past forty years. Rather, it implies that whenever we approach a mitzvah, we should do so with the same interest and enthusiasm we would have if it had been given that very day.

Even without foreknowledge, it's not difficult to pick out a just-turned bar mitzvah bachur putting on tefillin for one of his first times. Just look at the reverence with which he removes the tefillin from their sack, and the time he takes to slowly and lovingly unravel the straps. Observe the look of anticipation and trepidation on his face, as he places the tefillin shel-yad carefully on his arm, making sure to find just the right place. Notice the way he gazes into his siddur and locates the berachos [blessings], which he then recites slowly and with great concentration. Watch how long he lingers over his shel- rosh, making sure it sits in just the right place. And when he's finished davening, see how carefully and painstakingly he packs his tefillin away, taking care that when he takes them out tomorrow, he will find them just as he left them.

Contrast this to how most of us look when we put on our tefillin. How quickly do we murmur the

"Hineni mechaven..." [declaration of intent] prayer? How briskly do we wind the retzuos (straps) around our arms? Oh, and are you sure you made the berachah, "Al mitzvas tefillin?" [I speak here from experience...]

Tefillin, by nature of its being a day-in-day-out mitzvah, is likely to fall prey to the apathetic, ho-hum type of performance that the Torah is warning against in its admonition, "And these words, that I command you today, shall be upon your heart." Unlike lulav and esrog, which come only once a year, or even Shabbos which comes only once a week, tefillin is a true litmus-test with which to judge the extent that our service of Hashem and mitzvah performance has become "mitzvas anashim mi-lumada [performance by rote]."

Perhaps this is one reason (of which there are many) that tefillin belongs in the Shema. If "freshness" and vigour are a fundamental aspect of our avodah (service of Hashem), then there is no better way to judge ourselves than by examining the forethought and excitement with which we put on our tefillin daily.

The Bobover Rebbe zt"l once met up with a certain doctor to whom the Rebbe often referred petitioners who came to seek his advice and blessings. The Rebbe questioned him as to his success rate with a certain procedure. "Rebbe," the doctor said, "I've done that procedure so many times - I could do it with my eyes closed!" The Rebbe smiled.

After they parted ways, the Rebbe turned to his son and said, "Believe me; I've donned my tefillin far more times than the doctor has performed his procedure, yet I can say, Baruch Hashem, that I could not do it with my eyes closed! To the contrary - every day when I take out my tefillin, I try to don them with the same excitement and anticipation I had the very first time I put them on."

Anyone who ever had the occasion to observe the Rebbe zt"l lay tefillin would attest that this was no exaggeration. Each and every morning, at exactly 7:50, the Rebbe would enter the Beis HaMidrash and begin putting on tallis and tefillin. The Rebbe zt"l donned tefillin over 20,000 times in his life. Yet every day, he did so with the freshness and pure anticipation of one who was doing so for the very first time. Seeing this was greater than any mussar sefer.

While the calendar-based mitzvos each carry with them their own excitement and anticipation, it is the enthusiasm with which we perform our daily mitzvos - tzitzis, tefillin, birkas hamazon, tefilah, etc. - which truly indicate how close we are to reaching the ideal of "that I command you today."

Have a good Shabbos.

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