

FRUIT OF OUR LABOR

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

When you come in to the land which Hashem, your G-d is giving to you as an inheritance, and you inherit it and settle it; then take from the first of your fruits of the ground which you will bring from your land which Hashem your G-d is giving to you, and place it in a basket, and go up ... (Devarim 26:1-2)

This is the mitzvah of Bikurim--First Fruits. The entire process of bringing Bikurim up to the Temple was a celebrated one, glorious in every way and representative of the tremendous gratitude that the Jew had to G-d, and ought to have, for all that He has done for us.

However, that is not the focus of this d'var Torah. Rather, there is an interesting connection that is worth discussing in this context, even though the context of the Talmud is about judges refusing bribes:

A certain man brought Rav Annan [the judge] a present, a dish full of little fish. "What are you doing here?" Rav Annan asked him. "I have a case for you to adjudicate," said the visitor. Rav Annan thereupon said, "I am disqualified [to judge your case because of this gift you have brought me]." "You have the right to refuse to be my judge, but I beg you to still accept my gift and not prevent me from having brought Bikurim ..." For, as it is taught: "And there came a man from Bal Shahlisha, and he brought to the man of G-d (Elisha the prophet) food of Bikurim ..." (Melachim II 4:42). Now, did Elisha eat Bikurim (if he was not a kohen)? Rather, what we have to say is that one who brings a gift to a Torah scholar is like one brings Bikurim. (Kesuvos 105b)

That's besides the point. Not only was Elisha not a kohen, Tosfos adds, and therefore halachically unable to eat Bikurim, but, there was also no Temple, no altar, no High Priest, all of which is necessary before Bikurim can be brought up as the mitzvah prescribes!

Therefore, says Tosfos (quoting Seder Eliyahu Zuta):

"Torah scholars are an atonement for the Jewish people anywhere, as it says, 'If you offer a Meal-Offering of first fruits to G-d ...' (Vayikra 2:14), and it says, 'And there came a man from Bal Shahlisha' (Melachim II 4:42) ... Rather, Elisha and his students sat before him, and from here we learn that Torah scholars are an atonement for the Jewish people ..." (Tosfos)

In other words, Seder Eliyahu Zuta uses the first reference to Bikurim, an offering to effect atonement, to explain the second reference to Bikurim with respect to Elisha, as if to say, by bringing the gift to Elisha, the man atoned for himself as if he brought Bikurim to G-d in the Temple.

This teaches us many things, but first and foremost is the important role true Torah scholars play on behalf of the Jewish people, often hidden from the public eye. A Torah scholar (one who not only knows the breadth and depth of Torah, but fears G-d and represents Him well), acts in very much the same way sacrifices once did, and prayer now does: to atone for our mistaken ways. For this reason, it is important to serve them and take care of their needs; it is important to appreciate their importance, though we can't always see the effect they have.

It is also important to pray for their well-fare. For, it is no coincidence that every time a great Torah scholar leaves this world, something negative seems to happen to the Jewish people.

Shabbos Day:

All the people of the earth will see that you are called by the Name of G-d, and they will be afraid of you ... (Devarim 28:10)

This verse affords another opportunity to discuss the mitzvah of tefillin. Why? Because:

The great Rebi Eliezer said: This [verse] refers to tefillin worn on the head. (Menachos 35b)

"The majority of the Name (shin-dalet-yud) is on it, that is, the letter shin and bais." (Rashi)

The mitzvah of Tefillin is one of those that go very much unappreciated, with reason. Of all the mitzvos we perform daily, it is one of the most unusual. It may be a marvelous bit of leather-work--preparing, molding and shaping skin into precise black boxes--but the "laying" of these black boxes and their leather straps still remains to be a Divine mystery, at least on a simple level of understanding.

Forget the fact that the Talmud says that G-d wears Tefillin (Brochos 6a), whatever that means (and whatever size that might be!). Can we assume, therefore, that Tefillin is a very lofty concept, representing access to a very high level of G-dly revelation?

Yes. In fact, the whole process of putting on a tallis and Tefillin in the morning, and then praying the morning service represents a spiritual progression from the lowest depths to the highest heights that man can penetrate. It is a progression that represents our pushing off negative, materialistic forces in creation that intercede between us and G-d. (This is why it is so very important to make sure that one's Tefillin are kosher according to traditional Torah law. If not, it is like trying to drive a car without an engine.)

Not only do we go "up" when we wear Tefillin, but we also draw light down, a spiritual light that remains with us, rectifying us, as long as we are wearing our Tefillin. That is why the rabbis in the time of the Talmud used to wear their tallis and Tefillin as long as they could, and some still do. In Israel, it is not that unusual to see some wearing smaller pairs of Tefillin everywhere they go, even to the supermarket. Rushing one's Tefillin off, without good reason, is a mistake. Five minutes extra of wearing Tefillin, perhaps to learn a little Torah, is spiritually invaluable, providing that one does not think of mundane matters during that time.

This is why Tefillin often scared the "people of the earth." It wasn't merely the strangeness of the sight of seeing grown men wrapped in leather in the most unusual way. It was also the result of a spiritual "atmosphere" that they could sense, but not necessarily see, the result of Holy Light that made them feel uncomfortable with awe.

This is something to think about next time Tefillin are put on, and taken off, not to mention:

Reish Lakish said: All who lay Tefillin will have prolonged days, as its says, "L-rd! Concerning them, they shall live, and before all of them the life of my spirit, and You cured me and gave me life." (Yeshayahu 38:16). (Menachos 44a)

"Those who wear upon them the Name of G-d in Tefillin shall live!"

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

... *You must write on the stones all the words of this Torah well-explained.* (Devarim 27:8)

"Well Explained: In seventy languages." (Rashi)

"This Torah well-explained: The gematria [is equal to the words] 'also in seventy languages.'." (Ba'al HaTurim)

As G-d had commanded Moshe, he set up twelve large stones, each weighing forty se'im (over 100 pounds each), on the eastern side of the Jordan river, in the land of Moav, to serve as monument for the Jewish people's covenant with G-d. What's more, the Torah was inscribed on these stones, not just in the Holy Tongue, but in all seventy languages as well.

Logistically, there was a problem: How does one write the entire Torah in seventy languages on twelve stones? Says the Ramban: miraculously. Furthermore, there was another problem. According to one view in the Talmud, plaster was spread over the writing, to protect it from the rains and erasure. If so, how were the nations expected to read the writing and learn it? Answers the Talmud:

G-d endowed them with special intelligence to remove the plaster and to decipher and copy it; at that moment, the decree was sealed against them regarding idol worship, for they could have learned Torah, but didn't. (Sotah 35a)

We are not known as a missionizing people, and other than for a certain period during Roman times, we have not made converts in droves. We don't try to; it is only our desire as a people to see the nations of the world accept upon themselves the Seven Noachide Laws. Yet, we see from this week's parshah that our obligation to share the light of Torah with the rest of the world exists, at least in a passive way (though this does not include the Oral Law), and that we bear a major responsibility for their failure to do so.

This is why, perhaps (as it is pointed out in many places), that the gematria of the words "Gog u'Magog" --the name of the nation/final confrontation with Israel--equals seventy ($3+6+3+6+40+3+6+3$), the amount of nations to descend from Noach. It is as if to say:

"Remember those rocks, the ones upon which the Written Law of the Torah was inscribed to educate the Seventy Nations in the ways of G-d? If the Nations of the World had seen those rocks and learned what was on them, would they be going to war against you now?"

On the other hand, there is a message of the non-Jewish nations as well:

"Why were the words of Torah plastered over? To teach you that understanding the wisdom of Torah is not like understanding secular knowledge; to achieve the former, you have to "peel" of the outer layer and find the wisdom within."

Interestingly enough, the Hebrew word for "plaster" is the word "sid," which is very similar to the word "sod," which means "mystery," or "secret," and which usually alludes to Kabbalah; "sod" also has the numerical value of seventy. Perhaps there was an additional message as well:

"Don't think that by reading these words that you understand all the wisdom of Torah. The words you see hide many secrets, and many deep and profound thoughts, which, if you knew, you'd never, ever question the authenticity and importance of Torah!"

Hence, even stones in the world of Torah can have incredible importance.

Melave Malkah:

'Let us cut their cords and throw off their heavy ropes.' He who sits in Heaven will laugh, and the L-rd will mock them. (Tehillim 2:3-4)

According to the Radak, the first posuk means that the Philistines threatened to sever their bonds with Israel, clearly to intimidate the Jewish people into submission. The next verse, however, reminds us of what is taking place behind the scenes, or rather, above the scene: G-d looks down on the enemies futile threats and petty actions, and is not amused.

The question is, are we?

As we have discussed many times in the past, everything is the result of the hand of G-d: All is in the hands of Heaven except for fear of Heaven (Brochos 34b). The illusion of life is that it appears just the opposite, and it must, in order to enable us to make free-will decisions. The ultimate free-will decision? To choose to not fall for the illusion, no matter how convincing it can be.

And it can be very convincing, because they, the enemy, can be very convincing. G-d may be looking down from Heaven, and from His vantage point it might look very temporary, and humorous. But we don't get to see it from G-d's point of view, at least not while we're still alive. This is why King David added:

Then, He will speak to them in His anger, and His fury will terrify them ...

The usage of the word "then," says the Malbim, means "all of a sudden." The redemption of the Jewish people comes in the "blinking of an idea," and so does destruction of man as well. (This, we saw last week in Turkey, where a 45-second earthquake did more damage than months of bombing and billions of dollars could do to Iraq.) The power of G-d is awesome, and when He decides to put things straight, it happens quickly, and leaves little room for the Jew of doubt to rebuild his trust in G-d.

Therefore, we must not be fooled by the temporary successes of godless men, and must remain steadfast in our faith that at some time soon, G-d will avenge the downtrodden, and rid evil from the world.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

L'Shannah Tovah
May this year be filled with much blessing,
And only good news,
For all of the Jewish People.
Nizke Lirot Geulah Shlaimah!

All the best from
The Winston Family
Telzstone

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