

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Bo)

What is the power of a hug? Sometimes it's all about the context...

Recently, someone sent me a story regarding a fellow named Yankel, who was a survivor of Auschwitz. Sharing his story, he recalled his journey when he was loaded onto a cattle car and sent to Auschwitz, in the winter of 1944. In an effort to efficiently ensure the transports arrived at the camp to be immediately processed, trains were often held en-route until the crematoria schedule was ready for them. As such, the cattle cars would often sit on the tracks in stations overnight and even for days on end with no food and of course no blankets or supplies for the frozen and desperate Jews inside.

That first night in the cattle car it was bitterly cold, and the Jews locked in the cattle car were shivering with no blankets and no way to keep warm. Yankel was a teenager, freezing along with all the other townspeople that bitter night, when he noticed an elderly Jew he recognized from his town. The elderly man was violently shivering from the cold and looked like he was in a state of agony, so Yankel wrapped his arms around the man and began rubbing his arms and legs to try and keep him warm. Yankel was freezing himself, his fingers were numb and the exhaustion was beyond description but it was clear this older man would not make it without some help so he kept rubbing the man's body hour after hour, begging him to hang on; not to close his eyes.

Finally, the long night passed and as the sun rose, sunlight came through the two small windows high up and began to slightly warm the air. Yankel looked around and in horror, realized he was surrounded by frozen bodies; the only two people who had made it through the night were him and that old man; the car was filled with a deathly silence; everyone else had died.

Only two men had survived. The old man had survived because someone kept him warm, and Yankel had survived because he was warming the old man.

The greatest gifts we have in life are what we give to others...

This week we read the portion of **Bo**, one of the most significant portions in the entire Torah: with the tenth and final plague of the First Born, the Jews will finally leave Egypt; they will finally be free. And the Torah carries a powerful description of this exodus in all of its drama concluding with a verse that says it all:

“And it was on this day: Hashem took the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt in their Legions.” (Shemot (Exodus) 12:51)

One would have expected this to be the concluding verse of our portion, but *Bo* continues with one additional short chapter (ibid. 13:1-16) which seems to be out of context, with very little relationship to the actual story of the Exodus. Indeed, next week in the portion of *Beshalach* we will read the final chapter of the Exodus as the Jews who have already left Egypt are pursued by the mighty Egyptian Chariots ending in the dramatic miracle of the splitting of the sea. So, what is this chapter doing here?

Interestingly, this chapter contains the first two (of four) chapters contained within the *Tefillin*, and, even more interesting, it is the first time we actually encounter the mitzvah of ***Tefillin*** (Phylacteries) as we are enjoined to have them as a “...*sign on our hands, and a memory or adornment between our eyes...*” (ibid. 13:9; 16).

What is the Mitzvah of *Tefillin* doing here?

To be sure, there are many questions here but perhaps first and foremost we need to understand what *Tefillin* are all about before we can consider the context of their appearing here, of all places.

The **Maharsha** (Rav Shmuel Eliezer Halevi Eidels; 16th century Poland), in his commentary on tractate *Brachot* (6a), suggests that the secret of Tefillin is that in binding the Tefillin to our bodies, we are attempting to demonstrate that we wish to bind ourselves to Hashem (G-d). Tefillin, it seems is all about ***D’veikut***: connecting with Hashem.

The obvious question though, is how does a person connect with G-d? What does it even mean, to bind ourselves to Hashem?

Perhaps it might be easier to consider how we connect with anyone?

Imagine I’m on a trip and I realize our daughter’s birthday is coming up, so I find a big store and look around to look for what might be a nice birthday present she would like. Normally, if I was traveling, I would look for something nice and small that would also be easy to pack. But then something catches my eye and, getting excited, even though it is expensive and will be quite cumbersome to carry, I decide it’s worth buying it.

Upon arriving home, I can’t wait to see my daughter’s face when she opens this big beautifully wrapped gift, because that look will say it all. So, I give her the big box and watch with anticipation as she unwraps this big box and opens up her brand new...

Leather NBA-approved Michael Jordan personally autographed leather basketball.

Needless to say, the confused look I get is the not the look I was hoping for, because my daughter does not play basketball, has no interest in basketball and most probably is wondering who this strange man is that just showed up thinking she wants a basketball!

In fact, getting her a basketball would not only not make us closer, it would probably distance me from my daughter, because it would mean I had no idea who she is and what she really wants and even needs from ...

Showing up with a new book on Obstetrics, or the cycles of birth, on the other hand, would probably get me a big hug as she just finished Medical School and is looking forward to her internship in Obgyn....

We connect with people when we understand what they want and even need of us, and we become distant from them when we are doing exactly what they don’t want of us...

And the same is true regarding our relationship with Hashem. When we figure out what Hashem actually **wants** of us, we allow ourselves to connect with, and to become closer to Hashem.

Now, obviously G-d does not *need* anything *from* us, but Hashem does *want* certain things from us (though they are really *for* us).

Hashem obviously created us for a purpose, and when we are fulfilling that purpose and doing whatever it is Hashem put us here to do, we inevitably become more connected to and with Hashem. Which of course begs the question: How do we know what Hashem wants of us? Obviously, Hashem has to tell us; has to reveal what our purpose is here in this world.

(That is why every religion or at least every Monotheistic religion, has to have a revelation of sorts.)

This we call Torah and Mitzvot; in the Torah Hashem reveals to us what we are doing here; what our purpose is.

Of course, that's a lot to take in; 52 portions; 613 mitzvot...? So Hashem gave us a mini-Torah and put it in our Tefillin, and when we bind them to our arms (signifying all we do) and to our heads (signifying all that we think and feel and plan...) we have a chance to consider what it is Hashem really wants of us: in what we do and say and in what we think and plan...

Perhaps that is why these two paragraphs of our Tefillin appear here, just as we finally leave Egypt and slavery behind, hopefully forever.

Because in Judaism freedom was never the goal, it is just a vehicle; the real question is what we choose to *do* with our freedom, and the gift of time we finally, as a people, could reclaim.

And that is a question, particularly given the incredible gifts bestowed upon us in this generation, we need to think about every single day.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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