



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Ki Tavo

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 24, 2016

Ki Tavo

Fear vs. Awe



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Is the world afraid of the Jewish people?

Are the Jewish people afraid of the Jewish people?

In this week’s reading, *Parshat Ki Tavo*, the Torah states:

Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is associated with you, and they will fear you.

How will all the peoples of the world – *all*, not some – see that G-d’s name is associated with us? And what does it mean that they will *fear* us?

Fear is not terror – terror is being afraid of something dangerous and detrimental. Fear is awe. Fear is reverence. It happens when one stands before something greater than oneself.

Like a rabbi standing before his audience ...

Have you ever been afraid of speaking in public, of giving a sermon? This sermon – which addresses the mitzvah of *tefillin* in great detail – will teach you how to give a sermon not in fear but in awe of the One greater than us all!

Two powerful stories about *tefillin* capture this awe.

**FEAR VS. AWE:
THE MANY FORMS OF YIRAH**

1. Fear of Public Speaking (Joke)

This observation comes by way of Jerry Seinfeld:

“According to most studies, people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. *Death is number two!* Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy.”

2. The Causes of Fear

When it comes to public speaking, this kind of fear can have a number of causes.

It can be caused by a fear of failure, of doing something new, of being embarrassed, or it can be caused by humility. In the latter case, the speaker is struck by the magnitude of responsibility on his or her shoulders and is seized by a humbling awe of addressing other people. In effect, the speaker stands in reverence of the audience and fears being rendered mute.

The first type of fear – fear of failure – is a form of *self*-consciousness; the second a form of fear – stemming from humility – is a form of *higher* consciousness.

This brings me to the two main reasons that we fear anything:

1) We can be afraid of something negative, like losing a job, or getting stuck in a small place, or falling off of a high place. This is a form of dread, or trepidation. Let us call this type of fear “terror.” Its effect on us is demoralizing and disempowering – it weakens us.

2) But fear can also be caused by something positive, even exciting, like the first day on a dream job, or meeting a world-famous celebrity, or getting married, or being speechless in the face of tremendous wonder. Let's call this type of fear "reverence." Its effect on us is uplifting and empowering – it strengthens us.

When the Torah speaks of fear – using the Hebrew word *yirah* – it does not mean terror, it means reverence. Awe. We are commanded to love and *revere* G-d, not fear G-d like a boogiemer, but to stand in reverential awe of G-d, a being too great to comprehend.

When we stand in awe of G-d and obey His commandments, we fulfill our purpose and mission on this earth as His messengers, as His chosen people, which is to overwhelm one and all with Divine holiness so that the world shall stand in awe of G-d and His message.

3. Parshat Ki Tavo

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Ki Tavo*, addresses this very issue. It begins:

And it will be, when you come into the land which the Lord, your G-d, gives you for an inheritance, and you possess it and settle it...¹

Parshat Ki Tavo, meaning, "when you come," instructs us how to live our lives in the Holy Land, how to present ourselves to the world.

When we were in the wilderness, a wandering people, without a settled home, without the ability or the wherewithal to fulfill our mission on this earth, we could not yet begin living up to our *raison d'être* as a nation. Only when we come to the Land of Israel will we have the power and ability to fulfill our potential.

How then should the Nation of Israel act?

¹ Deuteronomy 26:1.

There are arguments on the left that Israel has to acquiesce to the world; there are arguments on the right that Israel should ignore the world.

What does the Torah say? How to act as the Nation of Israel, how to live in order to fulfill our vast potential?

The Lord will establish you as His holy people as He swore to you, if you observe the commandments of the Lord, your G-d, and walk in His ways.²

The key to being a holy people is to observe G-d's commandments and walk in His ways. How? By living our lives as directed and navigated by the 613 mitzvot of the Torah.

There's just one problem:

If I, or any rabbi, would get up here week after week and say one line: *Observe the commandments of the Lord, your G-d, and walk in His ways*, most of you would fall asleep.

So the question is not what to do – we know what to do. The question is why?

Why should we? Why *should* we do these mitzvot? What compels us, what convinces us?

Perhaps this is why the Torah doesn't stop there, but continues with the outcome of living this way:

Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is associated with you, and they will fear you.³

A few questions:

1. How will all the people of the world see that G-d's name is associated with us? Many people claim that they don't even believe in G-d, and even if they do, they believe their own religions more than ours; so how is it that a Jew performing a mitzvah shows all the peoples of the earth, not just some, or most, that G-d's name is associated with us?

² Deuteronomy 28:9.

³ Deuteronomy 28:10.

2. Is this verse implying that even when *all the peoples of the earth* live divinely, then G-d's name is not associated with them?
3. And would it not be more enticing if the Torah said, "and they will *love* you" instead of "and they will fear you"? Why fear? Who wants to be feared, save a bully, the mob, or a mother-in-law?

4. The Talmud on Tefillin

The Talmud⁴ states that this verse is tied to a very specific mitzvah – that of *tefillin*, the wearing of which imbues Israel with strength.

This mitzvah, says the Talmud,⁵ was given to Israel by G-d as a reward for the actions of our forefather Abraham.

The back-story is that when the king of Sodom urged Abraham to take whatever spoils he'd like after helping him and the other four kings to win a victory in war, Abraham responded:

*"Not a thread nor a shoe lace! I will not take anything that is yours. You should not be able to say 'It was I who made Abram rich.'"*⁶

Abraham – then known as Abram – did not want the world to think that he'd become wealthy thanks to anyone other than G-d. For this reason G-d gifted Abraham's children, you and I, with the mitzvah of *tefillin* – which consists of donning two black boxes containing Torah parchments that are affixed with black straps to the head and arm.

Now the Talmud links our verse specifically to head *tefillin*:

*How do we know that tefillin gives strength to Israel? For it says, Then all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is associated with you, and they will fear you. And we learned that Rabbi Eliezer the Great said this refers to the tefillin upon the head.*⁷

⁴ Berachot 6a.

⁵ Sotah 17a.

⁶ Genesis 14:23.

⁷ Berachot 6a.

5. Rabbi Eliezer the Great

Rabbi Eliezer the Great was one of the foremost sages of the Mishnah period. When he was on his deathbed, he made this request of his son:

“I see that my end is approaching. Please go tell your mother to suspend my *tefillin* in the upper chamber, and when after my ascension I shall come down to see them, do not cry, for they are closer to on high than to down below.”⁸

Why this strange request?⁹

The power of a mitzvah in general is the ability to channel divine energy into the physical world through using the physical item to fulfill the Divine will manifest in this physical mitzvah. The mitzvah of *tefillin* draws down the Divine “mind” so to speak into the physical *tefillin*.

Rabbi Eliezer the Great understood that the essence of divine intellect manifests in physical *tefillin* – in the black boxes (which store the Torah verses) and straps of leather. They take the highest of the high – G-d’s “mind,” G-d’s “intellect” so to speak – and they bind them to the heart of the world below.¹⁰ That is why we don *tefillin* on our arms near our hearts and on our heads where our intellect resides to symbolize the binding of the highest mind with the emotive faculties of the heart.

This is the most awesome and reverent thing of all – coming face to face with the highest intellect, the divine intellect, in a very tangible form of physical *tefillin* made of leather. In our world, black leather is usually associated with bikers, dress shoes and luxury vehicle upholstery – yet *tefillin* has taken this very physical matter of black leather and turned it into a conduit and receptacle for G-d’s intellect!

⁸ Vayeira, p. 98a.

⁹ For the following see: Likkutei Levi Yitzchak, Haarot l’Sefer Hazohar I, Vayeira, pp. 65-68, where Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson, the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s father, provides a brilliant Kabbalistic interpretation on this section of Zohar, the connection of *tefillin* and Shabbat to the masculine and feminine. Though it is beyond the scope of this sermon, therein may also be found the roots of why the male specifically is obligated to don *tefillin*, whereas the female essentially is *tefillin*. Just as a taste, this is why Rabbi Eliezer tells his son to ask his mother, the feminine presence in the home, to display the *tefillin* in the attic, to attribute the feminine quality of *binah* to the *tefillin*.

¹⁰ See Isa B’Midrash Tehillim 5634.

And this is why *when all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is associated with you* – when they will see you wearing *tefillin* – *they will fear you*. Fear as in awe – the healthy sense of reverence in the presence of the divine.

6. The Power and Awe of Tefillin (Two Stories)

Two powerful stories demonstrate this awe.

When Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, known as the Alter Rebbe, was imprisoned and being interrogated, the time for the morning prayers had arrived. So he asked for his *tallis* and *tefillin*. The Alter Rebbe put them on, and as he set the *tefillin* in the correct place on his head, a great dread overtook the officers.

When they questioned him as to whether he was striking fear in them through sorcery, he explained that this was a fulfillment of the (above) Talmudic teaching, that the verse, “All the nations shall see that G-d’s name is upon you, and they shall fear you,” refers to the head *tefillin*.

Some of the Chassidim were not entirely satisfied with this explanation, “Why doesn’t this always work? Why don’t we see a similar effect when other people wear *tefillin*?”

The Rebbe replied, “When the Talmud says, that the verse is referring to the head *tefillin*”, it doesn’t say “*tefillin she’al Harosh*”, “*tefillin on the head*”, but “*tefillin sheberosh*”, “*tefillin in the head*”. I.e. one must inculcate the lessons of *Tefillin* into one’s innermost thoughts and feelings for this to have its full effect.

When a Jewish male dons *tefillin* it is like dressing up in divine ornaments, which adorn and beautify the person, turning him into a dignified king, evoking awe in all who behold him. [Sadly, sometimes in exile, people can become so callous, and the divine can be so deeply concealed, that it also hides the divine beauty of *tefillin* and all divine beauty].

Another story:

During one of the Arab-Israeli wars (either the Six-Day war or the Yom Kippur War) there was a small group of Israeli soldiers that found themselves surrounded and completely outnumbered by a huge Arab army. Feeling that they had no hope for their lives to be saved, the Israeli soldiers figured that they would put on *tefillin* during their last few moments in this world. The large Arab force suddenly began to retreat. The Israelis decided to pursue them and inflict as much damage as they could. They succeeded in capturing several of the Arab soldiers. Later, the Israelis questioned the Arabs as to why they started to flee when they clearly had superior numbers. The Arabs said that they had seen through their binoculars that the Israelis were putting on objects that they did not recognize and they were frightened, thinking it was a new, sophisticated type of weapon.

Someone called the Lubavitcher Rebbe's office in New York and reported this story. When Rabbi Groner recounted the story to the Rebbe, he finished by saying "*huben zeı gemeint as es izz geven...* (they thought it was a new type of weapon)."

The Rebbe was not pleased with his choice of words and said "*voz heist zeı huben gemeint, es iz takeh azoi!* What do you mean they thought it was a weapon, it is indeed a (spiritual) weapon!"¹¹

7. Rabbi Eliezer's Tefillin

Let us now return to the story of Rabbi Eliezer.

Rabbi Eliezer, who was a purist, a person of disciplined nuance and who saw right to the core of the matter,¹² captured this awesomeness of *tefillin*

¹¹ http://www.yeshivahcollege.com/Yeshivah_College___hmkllh_hysybh/PAR-SHA/Entries/2013/1/18_Tefillin_Tidbits.html

¹² See Likkutei Levi Yitzchak, *Haarot l'Sefer Hazohar I*, Vayeira, p. 68; *Sichot Kodesh*, 5736 I, pp. 190-193.

– how it manifests the divine intellect. This is why he referred specifically to the head *tefillin*, which correspond to G-d's "intellect," G-d's "head," so to speak.

And this is why Rabbi Eliezer wanted his wife to place his *tefillin* in a high place and instructed his son never to weep over his passing. His whole life had been about teaching Torah and showing the world how the divine intellect permeates and is bonded to the world's heart and emotions. We are moved to tears only when we sense a disconnect between the upper and the lower, between head and heart, between body and soul, between matter and spirit. Rabbi Eliezer was telling his son, "Do not weep because though my soul may seem to disconnect from my body, the soul continues to live on. And though eyes of flesh and blood see a separation, it is only a mirage, the same way it 'seems' as if the intellect of the Creator is disconnected from His creation. Be reminded of this and do not weep."¹³

8. Abraham and His Mission

Abraham knew all that. His entire purpose was to change the narrative of the world, not to take from the world but to give to the world, not to take its matter but to give it spirit.

Because Abraham lived his purpose, he did not take physical spoils from the wars he had won. And G-d rewarded him. He said, "I will give a gift to your children, *tefillin*, which will help them follow in your footsteps, influencing the world to stand in awe of G-d and His name. Every time the other nations see the *tefillin* on a Jew's head they will tremble in awe and reverence of what reality is really all about."

¹³ See Sichot Kodesh 5736, p. 193.

This is something very profound. We Jews have to don *tefillin* for ourselves, certainly, but this mitzvah goes much deeper – we do it for the sake of the entire world! *So that all the peoples of the earth will see that the name of the Lord is associated with [us]*, and so that the entire world may perceive the G-d of Israel.

And our job is only complete when *all the peoples of the earth see that the name of the Lord is associated with [us]*. If we have inspired 99.9% percent of the people on earth, but one person is left behind, is not yet inspired, then we haven't yet fulfilled the verse which states *all the peoples of the earth will see...*

We must don *tefillin* to inspire all humanity, for our sake and for theirs. The name of G-d infuses every living thing. Our job is simply to remind all of creation of this fact.

When we don *tefillin* we fulfill this mission.

9. The Alter Rebbe's Teaching (Practical Advice)

The Alter Rebbe taught:

“The footsteps of man are directed by G-d.”¹⁴ When a Jew comes to a particular place, it is for a divine purpose – to perform a mitzvah, whether a mitzvah between man and G-d or a mitzvah between man and his fellow man. A Jew is G-d's messenger. Wherever a messenger may be, he represents the power of the one who sent him.¹⁵ The superior quality that souls possess is higher than of the angels (who are also “messengers”) for souls are messengers by virtue of Torah.¹⁶

¹⁴ Psalms 37:23.

¹⁵ Cf. Hayom Yom of 7 Adar I, and Iyar 8.

¹⁶ Hayom Yom 10 Tammuz. Translation courtesy of Chabad.org.

It is possible that some of us are afraid of this massive obligation and responsibility. It is possible that some of us would rather blend in with the world than stand out. It is possible that we have more of a desire that the world will see that the name of “normalcy” or “democracy” is associated with us, than that *the name of the Lord is associated with [us]*.

But we cannot escape our mission. Indeed, it is what makes us Jewish. And to help us fulfill it, here are a few suggestions:

1. Men who do not yet don *tefillin* should start.
2. Men who do should encourage others to do likewise.
3. Women are not obligated to don *tefillin*. However, it is only because women themselves represent the divine intellect in a revealed way. (This is why Rabbi Eliezer requested that his wife place the tefillin in the upper chamber, not his son who was obligated to do this mitzvah.¹⁷) But women have the special power and obligation to reveal the high divine intellect wherever they walk. This can be done in countless ways: A) by demonstrating how a mundane thing in life (like flour and water, say) is really an expression of divine intellect through the blessing over challah; B) by keeping the mitzvah of family purity, thereby infusing spirituality and sanctity into a physical act; C) by giving their children a Jewish education thus turning $1+1=2$ into the revealed presence of the One.
4. Men should do likewise. For example by A) taking mundane money and showing how it is really an expression of divinity when used to feed the poor or support Jewish education. Or by B) picking up a very material iPhone and using it to fulfill the mitzvah of respecting parents. (You can use the iPhone to tell your parents how much you love them – thereby transforming an Apple-patented gadget into a tool that fulfills one of the Ten Commandments!)

¹⁷ See Likkutei Levi Yitzchak *ibid*.

10. Life is Not Fear (Conclusion)

When we put on *tefillin*, among all those who see that the name of G-d will be associated with us will surely be our own families, our own spouses and children, our own neighbors and co-workers. And they will stand in awe and reverence not because we are great on our own, but because we are messengers of the greatest.

Sometimes, we are too afraid of our own selves. Sometimes, we are more comfortable not having a profound purpose, but, as we tell our children, we don't always get what we like.

We have been gifted with *a heart to know, eyes to see, ears to hear*.¹⁸ It is our great power, and with great power comes great responsibility.

It's nothing to be afraid of. For life is not fear. Life is awesome.

Shabbat Shalom!

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¹⁸ Deuteronomy 29:3.