

Parashat Bo 5774, 2013:

Tefillin and the Power of The Oral Law

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

The concluding verse of our *parasha* states: “And it shall be for a sign upon your hand and for ornaments – *totafot* - between your eyes, for with a mighty hand did the L-rd take us out of Egypt.” (*Sefer Shemot* 13:16, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) The word “*totafot*” appears, as well, with minor variations in *Sefer Devarim* 6:8 and 11:18. While this translation defines this term as “ornaments,” its exact meaning remains elusive, since it is quite likely that *totafot* is not a Hebrew word – even though it is found in the Torah.

Rabbi Akiva was the first to champion the foreign language etymology of “*totafot*” approach in a Mishnaic period statement that appears in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 4b:

Has it not been taught: “*Letotafot*” [frontlets] occurs three times in the Torah, twice in its incomplete form and once in its complete spelling, four in all, to indicate [that four sections] are to be inserted in the Tefillin? Such is the opinion of R. Ishmael. But R. Akiba maintains that there is no need of that interpretation, for the word *totafot* itself implies four, [it being composed of] *tot* which means two in Katpi [Coptic] and *tot*, which means two in Afriki [Phrygian]. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud* with my emendations to enhance readability)

Rashi (1040-1105) adopted Rabbi Akiva’s explanation of our term in the first part of his commentary on our *pasuk* (*Sefer Shemot* 13:16): “**and for ornaments between your eyes:** Heb. תיִלְפֻטֹּת, Tefillin. Since they are [composed of] four compartments, they are

called טַּפּוּטָּה (*totafot*), ט (tot) in Coptic meaning two, and פּה (*foh*) in Afriki (Phrygian) meaning two (*Talmud Bavli, Menachot* 34b) [thus 2+2=4 boxes of Tefillin].” Closer to our own time, Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan *zatzal* (1934-1983) maintained the foreign language motif of “*totafot*” in his glosses on our verse:

According to Talmudic tradition, the word *totafoth* alludes to the four boxes in the head Tefillin, since *tot* in a Caspian dialect is two and *foth* or *poth* is two in African or Phrygian (see note on Genesis 10:2; *Menachoth* 34b). The word *tot* appears to be cognate to ‘two,’ and possibly also to the Latin *totas*, and hence the English ‘total.’ *Poth* is cognate to the Gothic *bothe*, the English ‘both,’ and the Sanskrit *botto*. Significantly in ancient Egyptian, *ftu* or *foh* means four, while *tot* can denote a gathering, resemblance, divine, or hard leather. Hence, *totafoth* may have had the connotation of a fourfold amulet, made of leather, as the Tefillin indeed are. Others note that in Egyptian, *tot* or *otat* denotes the brain, where the head Tefillin are placed (Abarbanel). (*Sefer Shemot* 13:16, *The Living Torah*)

Regardless as to which explanation of “*totafot*” we maintain, however, we must admit we have literally no idea as to what exactly “a fourfold amulet, made of leather” actually might be. What does it look like? What should be its color and composition? What are its minimum and maximum dimensions? What, if anything, should be placed within such an object and what should be the order be of that which is placed therein? All of these questions, and hundreds more, can readily be asked regarding our term. It must be emphasized that these are not mere academic inquiries, since they speak directly to the essence of one of the *Taryag Mitzvot* (613 Commandments of the Torah) namely, Tefillin.

Tefillin, is, in fact, representative of an entire class of mitzvot whose definitional structure and constitutive elements are completely absent from the commandment stated in the Torah. For example: “And you shall take for yourselves on the first day, the fruit of a beautiful tree, date palm fronds, a branch of a braided tree, and willows of the brook,

and you shall rejoice before the L-rd your G-d for a seven day period.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 23:40) Once again, just as we saw in the case of Tefillin, “the fruit of a beautiful tree” and “a branch of a braided tree” remain completely undefined. Little wonder, then, that in the case of the first term, the Talmud suggests many species of fruit before it settles upon the Etrog as the solely authentic “fruit of a beautiful tree.”

This fundamental lack of clarity and definition based solely upon the Biblical text is not limited to mitzvah objects (*chafatzim*), it includes actions (*ma'asim*) as well. To illustrate: Ritual slaughtering (*schechitah*) is one of the basic foundations of *Kashrut* (maintaining a kosher home). Quite simply, one is proscribed from eating meat that has not been slaughtered in the proper fashion. As such, it would reasonable to expect that a significant number of *pasukim* (verses) in the Torah would focus upon this commandment. This is a particularly apt assumption, given the vast amount of space accorded *schechitah* in the *Shulchan Aruch*, the other major codes of Jewish law, and the Responsa (*sheilot u'teshuvot*) literature. Yet, time after time, the Torah merely states: “and you shall slaughter [it],” without giving any other clue or guidelines as to how this should be done. Clearly, without the *Torah shel Ba'al Peh* (Oral Law), we would have no idea as to the halachically acceptable manner of fulfilling this mitzvah.

We are now in a position to better comprehend the famous opening words of *Pirkei Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers): “Moshe received the Torah at Mount Sinai...” Given our brief examination of Tefillin, Etrog, and *schechitah*, and as the *meforshei haMishnah* (interpreters of the Mishnah) explain, this statement includes both the *Torah she'Biktav* (the Written Law – Bible) and the *Torah shel Ba'al Peh* – for without the steadfast guidance of our Sages we would know not what to do.

Each evening, in the Evening Prayer service we reverently recite: “The words of the Torah are our very lives and the measure of our days – and we are ever involved in them both day and night.” May we always be cognizant that this statement refers to the world of Torah in its widest and most holistic sense, and that we need both the Written and Oral Law in order to ultimately fulfill Hashem’s will. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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