

VAESCHANAN (DEUTERONOMY 3:23-7:11)

Write Between the Eyes!

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

Question: What is a *Mezuzah*?

Some will tell you that a *Mezuzah* is a religious article, or good luck charm, that is affixed to your doorway. Someone I know once overheard a lady talking about the beautiful *Mezuzah* she had just purchased. "Now all I need," she said, "is the little piece of paper that goes inside."

Possible answer #2: The above-mentioned "piece of paper," actually, a handwritten parchment scroll, that goes into the case.

Possible answer #3: (variation on answer #1) A necklace or dashboard ornament with the above-mentioned insert.

Correct answer: None of the above.

When G-d gave Moses the Mitzvah of the Passover offering, He told him that the Israelites were to take some blood and smear it on the two *Mezuzahs* and the beam over the door in the house where they were eating the offering. (Exodus, 7:12) Have you ever seen a doorway with two *Mezuzahs*?

A *Mezuzah* is, quite simply, a doorpost. It is not a parchment scroll, nor is it a container for that scroll. Rather, a *Mezuzah* is the doorpost that the scroll and container are attached to. (For more information about *Mezuzah*, see "Sheepskin or Cheapskin?")

This presents a problem. The Mitzvah of *Mezuzah* appears in this week's Torah Portion as well as last week's. Let us examine this Mitzvah.

One of the primary statements of Jewish belief is the Shema. "*Shema Yisrael, Listen Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One.*" (Deuteronomy, 5:4) This verse from last week's Torah Reading is the statement of our uncompromising belief that there is only one G-d, the G-d of Israel. It is a statement that is recited every morning and every night, as well as on one's deathbed. That verse, as well as the five verses that follow it, constitute the first of three paragraphs that are collectively referred to as "the *Shema*." The second paragraph, which deals with the concept of divine reward and punishment, appears in this week's portion. (Deut., 11:13-21) (The third section, not part of this discussion, is Numbers, 15:37-41)

There are two Mitzvahs, *Tefillin* and *Mezuzah*, that appear in both of these sections. We are supposed to copy these sections of the Torah, and insert them into containers. The *Tefillin*, containing these two paragraphs, as well as two other Torah sections, are worn on the biceps of the weaker arm, and on one's head, above the hairline. For the Mitzvah of *Mezuzah*, these two sections are attached to the doorpost (*Mezuzah*) that is on the right side as you enter.

The problem is that a careful reading seems to indicate that we are not properly fulfilling the requirements of these commandments. "*Place My words on your heart and soul. Tie them (these words) as a sign on your hand, and as 'Totafos' (a difficult word to translate)* between your eyes...write them on the doorposts of your houses and gates.* (11:18, 20)

Have you ever seen someone wearing *Tefillin*? These black leather boxes seem to be worn in the wrong place! The Torah says to tie them on your "*Yad*." The word "*Yad*" means hand, not muscle of the upper arm. Shouldn't we wear the head *Tefillin* on the bridge of the nose, "*between your eyes*," and not on the area of the head above the hairline? Where are these practices coming from?!

And what about the *Mezuzah*? If the Torah says to write the words of the *Shema* ON OUR DOORPOSTS, why don't we? Why do we settle for attaching a piece of parchment to the doorpost? Apparently, WE ARE NOT FULFILLING OUR OBLIGATION!! If we want to be truly Torah-observant Jews, we should take a magic marker and scribble two Hebrew paragraphs on the **doorposts** of our homes!

Why do we, who believe that the Torah was given to us by G-d on Mt. Sinai, disobey what is written in the Torah? To explain this apparent contradiction, it is necessary to examine what actually happened at Mt. Sinai.

The Torah, when discussing the laws of preparing animals to be eaten, says, "*Slaughter your cattle...in the manner that I have commanded you.*" (Deut., 12:21) Where in the Torah does G-d tell Moses how to slaughter Kosher animals? A thorough search of every verse of the Torah would seem to indicate that it never happened!!

Obviously, not every command that was given to Moses was recorded in the Torah. Judaism teaches that there is more than one Torah. There are actually two, the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. At Mt. Sinai, G-d gave the Written Torah, which He dictated to Moses word-for-word. In addition, G-d explained to Moses the details and nuances of the various commandments and events described in the Torah.

G-d explained to Moses how to properly slaughter Kosher animals and how to properly observe the Mitzvah of *Mezuzah*. He told Moses that when the Torah writes that *Tefillin* should be "**on your hand... and...*between your eyes*," what it MEANS is "on the biceps of the weaker arm and on the area of the head ABOVE the area between your eyes." These explanations, which were also given at Sinai, were

originally not put into writing, hence the term, "Oral Torah." These teachings were handed down from teacher to student in an unbroken chain of Tradition linking us all the way back to Mt. Sinai. Eventually, these traditions were recorded in the Talmud in order to prevent them from being forgotten.

The Talmud "reads between the lines" of the text and shows us clearly what Torah is trying to tell us. Without the insights of the Oral Torah we wouldn't know what a Mezuzah should look like. We wouldn't know that "*an eye for an eye*" (Exodus, 21:24) means that you should PAY MONEY for injuring another person. We wouldn't even know how to observe Yom Kippur!

Many people find this concept very difficult to accept. It is one thing, they say, to follow the commandments that are written in the Torah. It is another thing entirely to accept "interpretations" that rabbis read into the text and accept them as fact. Why can't we just read the Torah and obey what it says? Who says there is anything divine about this Oral Torah?

Without the oral traditions that Moses received on Mt. Sinai and conveyed to Joshua, who, in turn, passed them on to us through the Prophets, we would have no idea how to live our lives as Jews.

Consider the following: Everyone knows that you are supposed to fast on Yom Kippur. It says so in the Torah, right? Right?! Right?! Not quite. The Torah tells us, "...*afflict your souls*." (Leviticus, 16:29) How does one afflict one's soul? Stones in your shoes? Sleeping on the floor? Spending the weekend with your mother-in-law?? :-)) The Talmud explains that there are five ways that we afflict ourselves on Yom Kippur, one of them being by fasting.

Everyone knows that we're not allowed to have meat and milk together. It says so in the Torah, right? Right?! Right?! Not quite. The Torah tells us, "*Don't cook a kid in its mother's milk*." (Exodus, 23:19; ibid. 34:26; Deut., 14:21) Where does it say anything about cheeseburgers?! The Talmud tells us, based upon the fact that the above verse is stated three separate times in the Torah, that there are three separate prohibitions: 1) Meat and milk may not be cooked together. 2) Meat and milk that have been cooked together may not be eaten. 3) Meat and milk that have been cooked together may not be sold, given to one's animal, or otherwise be used to financially benefit the owner. (Eating milk and meat that have not been cooked together, e.g., a salami sandwich with a glass of milk, is prohibited by rabbinic decree.)

Living in Western Society, many of us have been raised on "Bible stories." Unfortunately the sources of our knowledge are often limited to doctor's office children's Bibles and Charlton Heston. We have not allowed ourselves to see the Torah in its true depth and beauty. For example, how old was Isaac when Abraham almost sacrificed him? Five? Seven? Twelve? The Talmud says that Isaac was a full-grown man of 37 when this event occurred. (This information should certainly put Isaac's role into a different perspective.) Where was Moses during the forty years from the time he killed the Egyptian and ran away from the Pharaoh until the time he saw the Burning Bush and returned to save his people? According to the Talmud, he was a powerful general and almost became king of an African nation.

Without the insights of the Oral Torah, the Written Torah is a closed book. There is so much depth and profundity that is lost when we limit our Torah exposure to literal translation of the text. In Genesis, 26:5, G-d praises Abraham for observing "*My TORAHS*."

Anyone can read verses from "the Bible." Only through the insights of the Talmud and traditional Jewish Commentaries does it become TORAH.

Have a great Shabbos.

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