

Ki Tavo

I was once rushing through an airport trying to make a flight and of course, I was running a bit late. The line at the security checkpoint was somewhat longer than I had anticipated. As I approached the checkpoint they examined my hand luggage and found two small black boxes with long black leather straps. I have to admit that these awkward objects were certainly worthy of arousing suspicion. The guard insisted that I tell him what is inside these small boxes (or he would have to break them open to check). Luckily, I was able to evade the scrutiny by answering that they were religious articles. However, his question is a good one. What is inside the boxes?

The Talmud tells us (Brachos 6a) that just as we have tefilin, G-d also has a pair of tefilin. The difference between our tefilin and that of G-d's is the inscription recorded inside the boxes. Our tefilin contains a tiny piece of parchment on which it is inscribed "Hear Israel, Hashem is our G-d, Hashem is one." In short, tefilin that we wear pledge our allegiance to G-d. Conversely, the tefilin worn by G-d contains a verse in Chronicles 1:17, "Who is like the nation of Israel, one nation on the earth." G-d responds by recording His allegiance to us. The Talmud records that G-d so to speak says to the Jews, "You made me one entity in the world and I will make you one entity in the world." The Talmud is relating to us the unique and intimate relationship that G-d shares with the Jewish people. There is a mutual love for one another. Just as we look up to G-d and say there is no other like you, He looks "down" to us and says there is no nation like you.

This message is also conveyed in this weeks Torah reading. The Torah provides a detailed list of the ways in which we distinguish G-d as being unique and the endeavors that we agree to uphold. The Torah then provides a second list of ways that G-d considers us to be special and enumerates the commitments that he makes to us. The first list outlines our responsibilities to G-d, as it states (26:17), "You have distinguished Hashem today to be a G-d for you, and to walk in His ways, and to observe His decrees, His commandments, and His statutes and to listen to His voice." Each detail in the list precisely fits this description. However, when we analyze the list of G-d's responsibilities to us, something in the list doesn't seem to fit. The Torah writes, "And Hashem has distinguished you today to be for Him a treasured people as He spoke to you, and to observe all His commandments, and to make you supreme over all the nations that He made, for praise, for renown, and for splendor and so that you will be a holy people to Hashem, your G-d as He spoke." Now, words such as "praise" and "splendor" seem to fit the theme of all the wonderful things that G-d will do for us. However the statement, "and to observe all His commandments" is awkward. Why is this part of G-d's list of responsibilities to us? It was already mentioned and should have only been mentioned in our list of responsibilities to Him!

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The Mishna (Makos 23b) states, Rabbi Chananya the son of Akashya says G-d wanted provide a merit for the Jewish people, therefore he increased the amount of mitzvos they must observe. At first glance the statement seems peculiar. Increasing the amount of mitzvos that we are commanded to observe burdens us with more responsibility and obligates us to maintain a heightened level of awareness not to fall short. Why is this enormous responsibility considered to be a merit for the Jews?! Clearly, the Mishna is trying to change our perspective regarding mitzvos. When a military officer receives a list of orders from his superior does he consider the long list to be a burden? No. It is an honor! This is why he became an officer despite that his level of responsibility is significantly higher than that of his troops.

Mitzvos are not to be perceived as a burden and an unwanted responsibility. Mitzvos are an honor given to G-d's most precious officers. The increased amount of mitzvos that we are obligated to conform to is in fact a merit. Mitvos are a treasure that G-d has merited us with. We can now appreciate why the Torah lists the observance of mitzvos not only amongst our list of duties to G-d, but is also listed amongst the phenomenal way that G-d treats us. The mitzvos are our badges of honor. Just as they belong in list A they also belong in list B. As we approach Rosh Hashana and renew our commitment to G-d for this upcoming year, we should remember the proper perspective; mitzvos are a privilege, not a liability.

Shabbat Shalom

The JSN Team

