YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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*Avodat Hashem*

Foundations of Divine Service

**By Harav Baruch Gigi**

**Shiur #25: Loving God (XV): Loving Israel and Loving God (part 3)**

**Introduction**

 In this *shiur* we will delve into two additional points: the *mitzva* of *tefillin* and the blessing of *Sim Shalom*, which exemplify the idea of the relationship between loving Israel and loving God that we have developed in the previous *shiurim*.

**The *Mitzva* of *Tefillin*: A Unique Entity**

 First, we will discuss the *mitzva* of *tefillin*.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Talmud states:

R. Avin ben R. Ada said in the name of R. Yitzchak: How do you know that the Holy One, blessed be He, puts on *tefillin*? For it is said: “The Lord has sworn by His right hand, by His strong arm” (*Yeshayahu* 62:8). “By His right hand” – this is the Torah, for it is said: “Lightning flashing at them from His right” (*Devarim* 33:2). “By His strong arm” – this is the *tefillin*, as it is said: “May the Lord grant strength to His people” (*Tehillim* 29:11). And how do you know that the *tefillin* are a strength to Israel? For it is written: “And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord’s name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you” (*Devarim* 28:10). And it has been taught: R. Eliezer the Great said: This refers to the *tefillin* of the head.

R. Nachman ben Yitzchak said to R. Chiyya bar Avin: What is written in the *tefillin* of the Lord of the Universe? He replied to him: “And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth” (*Divrei Ha-yamim* I 17:21). Does, then, the Holy One, blessed be He, sing the praises of Israel? Yes, for it is written: “You have affirmed this day that the Lord [is your God]… and the Lord has affirmed this day that you [are… His treasured people]” (*Devarim* 26:17-18). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Israel: You have made me a unique entity in the world, and I shall make you a unique entity in the world. You have made me a unique entity in the world, as it is said: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” (*Devarim* 6:4). And I shall make you a unique entity in the world, as it is said: “And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth.” (*Berakhot* 6a)

It seems that the main point of this midrashic passage is not about the notion of God putting on *tefillin*. That imagery is only the background for presenting the idea of the connection between the people of Israel and God that is formed as a result.

 Israel puts on *tefillin* and God puts on *tefillin*. Israel sings God’s praises and God sings Israel’s praises. Israel affirms God and God affirms Israel. Likewise, Israel proclaims the uniqueness the name of God – “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone” – and God proclaims the uniqueness of His nation – “And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth.” You have made me a unique entity in the world, and I shall make you a unique entity in the world. I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine.

 Despite the many faces of God in His relationship with His creations – He appears as a father, as a king, as an old man, as a warrior, as one who is compassionate and gracious, yet passionate and vengeful – the Creator is a unique entity in the world. This is reflected in Ba’al Ha-Turim’s interpretation of the verse, “Hear, O Israel”:

There is a separation between “the Lord” and “our God.”[[2]](#footnote-2) This means that even though you have seen several semblances [of God,] and even though I appear with one of them featuring the attribute of justice and with the other featuring the attribute of compassion, still they are all one. (Ba’al Ha-Turim, *Devarim* 6:4)

Accordingly, some suggest that one must have in mind the following when reciting the verse: Even though the Lord is our God, Master of all the individual forces, God is still One.

 Rambam advances a similar idea in *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah*:

This God is one. He is not two or more, but one, unified in a manner that [surpasses] any unity that is found in the world; i.e., He is not one in the manner of a general category that includes many individual entities, nor one in the way that the body is divided into different portions and dimensions. Rather, He is unified, and there exists no unity similar to His in this world.

If there were many gods, they would have body and form, because like entities are separated from each other only through the circumstances associated with body and form.

Were the Creator to have body and form, He would have limitation and definition, because it is impossible for a body not to be limited. And any entity that itself is limited and defined [possesses] only limited and defined power. Since our God, blessed be His name, possesses unlimited power, as evidenced by the continuous revolution of the sphere, we see that His power is not the power of a body. Since He is not a body, the circumstances associated with bodies that produce division and separation are not relevant to Him. Therefore, it is impossible for Him to be anything other than one.

The knowledge of this concept fulfills a positive commandment, as it says, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” (*Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 1:7)

Thus, our *mitzva* and our obligation is to believe and proclaim to the world that the Lord our God is the Lord alone. After we reinforce and internalize this knowledge in our consciousness, we joyfully declare twice daily – morning and evening – “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” You have made me a unique entity in the world.

 The nation of Israel is a unique entity in the world as well, despite the fact that they too take on different appearances. One individual might be “unstable as water” (*Bereishit* 49:4); another might blaze with fiery vengeance; another might be mighty as a lion; while another might be fleet as “a hind let loose” (*Bereishit* 49:21). With this in mind, we read in a *beraita*:

Our rabbis taught: If one sees a crowd of Israelites, he says, “Blessed is He who discerns secrets,” **for the mind of each is different from that of the other, just as the face of each is different from that of the other**. (*Berakhot* 58a)

Despite this, the verse states, “And who is like Your people Israel, **a unique nation on earth**.” Regarding the blessings that Ya’akov gave to his sons, *Chazal* and Rashi note that only some of the sons received true blessings, while others did not. In addition, each son was given a different blessing. As Rashi writes, based on *Chazal*:

“And this is what their father said to them as he blessed them”: Now is it not so that some of them he did not bless, but chided? Rather, this is what is intended: And this is what their father spoke to them – what is related in this section. One might think that he did not bless Reuven, Shimon, and Levi. Therefore, it states, “as he blessed them” – meaning all of them.

“A blessing appropriate to him”: With the blessing destined to befall each of them.

“He blessed them”: It should have said, “A blessing appropriate to him, he blessed *him*.” Why does it say, “He blessed *them*”? Since he bestowed upon Yehuda the might of a lion, and upon Binyamin the power to seize like a wolf, and upon Naftali the fleetness of a hind, **I might think that he did not include all of them in all the blessings. Therefore, it states: “He blessed them.”** (Rashi, *Bereishit* 49:28)

*Or Ha-Chayim* explains the purpose of the unique characteristics and strengths of each individual member of the community of Israel:

“A blessing appropriate to him” – in keeping with the unique aspect of his soul and his actions. You must know that among souls, each one possesses a virtuous aspect. Some possess the virtue of priesthood and some kingship; some are crowned in Torah, some heroism, and some wealth… Ya’akov, in his prophecy, endeavored to bless each one according to the blessing that was appropriate for him…

“He blessed them” – [The Torah] uses the word “them” in the plural form, since the blessing of each and every one of them was appropriate for himself and also for all of his brothers. As one would bless a king that his “hand shall be on the nape of [his] foes” (*Bereishit* 49:8), the benefit reaches all his brothers as well. And similarly, when he would bless extensively the virtue, abundance, and status of one of them, the blessings would reach all his brothers as well on a smaller scale. That is why it says, “to each a blessing appropriate to him.” (*Or Ha-Chayim*, *Bereishit* 49:28)

But this alone is insufficient. It is not enough that the community benefits from the blessings of each of its individual elements. This is only one aspect of how the goodness spreads to the entire collective, evoking the expression, “A light for one is a light for one hundred.” We must also address the principle of the unity of the aggregate as a whole.

Malbim delves deeper into the root and foundation of this connection between the nation of Israel and God:

This is precisely what their father said to them as he blessed them, each man according to his supernal root. Until this point in history, the heart and the uniqueness had resided in one lone individual in each generation; that individual served as the dwelling place for God’s *Shekhina* and for all spiritual benefits. Now, however, the root diverged into branches (*anafim*), first dividing into twelve tribes (*shevatim*) – meaning twelve branches, since the words *shevatim* and *anafim* are synonymous. Together with Ya’akov, their root, they totaled thirteen. And as it says in the Midrash, [the sons] said to [Ya’akov]: “Just as there is only One in your heart, so is there in our heart only One” (*Pesachim* 56a), meaning that they were united just as they were in the person of Ya’akov, who was the root of these branches. Therefore, even though he gave each tribe an individual blessing, they all participated in all the blessings. Because of this, it says, “All these were the tribes of Israel, twelve in number” (*Bereishit* 49:28), since each one of them was made up of all twelve, just as the power residing in each individual branch of a tree is possessed by the entire tree. This is precisely what their father said to them; and it is written, “A blessing appropriate to him” – meaning that the blessing of each one was needed for the entire group. (Malbim, *Bereishit* 49:29)

This is an idea that we have noted in the past: “One thing God has spoken; two things I have heard” (*Tehillim* 62:12). This verse expresses the incredible tension between God’s view of reality and the regular human view of reality. In general, we distinguish between the different versions and see them as different forces, which are sometimes contradictory. However, in God’s view, all is one. All the different varieties merge to form a new, harmonious, complete creation.

 Only God can make us a unique entity in the world: through his view of the root of all the souls of Israel; through the destiny that he assigned to us as those who invoke His name in the world; and through the declaration, “And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth.”

 The nation of Israel becomes a unique entity in the world the moment that it unifies God’s blessed name. The nation of Israel becomes one when it recognizes the fact that the foundation of its own unity is rooted in that of its Creator. Our unity is contained within the unity of the Creator, and the Creator is the Source of the soul of Israel.

 The statement, “We are those who affirm You, and You are He who affirms us,” is not just an expression of mutual love, but an expression of the deep, essential connection between the beloved and the darling who cling to each other, as it says in *Iyov*: “One touches the other; not even a breath can enter between them. Each clings to each; they are interlocked so they cannot be parted” (*Iyov* 41:8-9).

 R. Yosef Chayim, known as Ben Ish Chai, wrote:

Therefore, Israel was called “a unique nation on earth,” because they worship God, may He be blessed, out of love (*ahava*), which has the same numerical value as “one (*echad*).” And we benefit as a result of this from the thirteen divine attributes, in the merit of this loving service. Therefore, on the Festival of Joy (Sukkot) we encircle the ark with the *lulav* one time on each of the six days, and on Hoshana Rabba seven times. In all, we encircle the ark thirteen times, like the numerical value of *ahava* and like the numerical value of *echad*, which evokes the thirteen divine attributes. And through this, with God’s help, we can understand the verse, “**One touches the other; not even a breath can enter between them**.” It means that Israel, which is a unique nation that worships out of love for the One – i.e., the thirteen times we encircle the ark, which is equivalent to *echad* – will draw close to the Holy One, blessed be He. By doing this, the impure breath of external elements cannot enter between them. As a result, they will merit on Shemini Atzeret to stand alone before the Holy King. (*Ben Ish Chai*, *Ve-Zot Ha-Berakha*, Year 1)

The Apter Rebbe wrote in the same vein:

We see that the Holy One, blessed be He, is called One, and Israel is also called “one.” This is true when the people of Israel accept upon themselves the yoke of God’s kingship and cause their intellect, their traits, and all their desires to be subservient to God alone. And when they do not have any desire or lust other than to worship God alone, then they are called the aspect of one – a unique nation.

This is not true when, God forbid, they are not like this. Then they are not in the aspect of one, since their thought and their intellect are mired in lusts and other external things, and each time they give their power and their thought to another external thing (may God save us). If so, their traits and their intellect are separate; they are not in the same place. Indeed, when they straighten their path and their thoughts and their desires toward God alone – to do God’s will wholeheartedly – then they are in complete unity. And when they are in this aspect, this is the aspect of “one.” Then “**one touches the other**,” and it is as if they unite with the One God in the secret of oneness. As it says in the holy *Zohar*: “To become one and one; and we prove this from [the fact that] He is One and His name is one.”

To allude to this holy unity, the Sanhedrin would sit in a semicircle, as if the circle were split in two. The second half, as it were, is the Creator, blessed be He and blessed be His name, who completes the circle to form a complete and true unity. This is done through the Torah and the true justice that emerges from the Sanhedrin for all of Israel – and it is all in the secret of oneness. (*Ohev Yisrael*, *Parashat Kedoshim*)

**Bless Us, Our Father, All As One, in the Light of Your Face**

 In *Birkat Ha-Shalom* (the blessing of peace), the final blessing of the *Amida*, we request several things of God: “Grant peace, goodness and blessing, grace, loving-kindness, and compassion… the Torah of life and love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life, and peace.”[[3]](#footnote-3) We end the blessing, “Who blesses His people Israel **with peace**.” The root of all the requests found in the first part of the blessing is contained within the blessing of peace. The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*, from the same root as *shalem*, meaning “whole.” In other words, the peace that we request from God refers to the total wholeness that is found in the natural order of Creation. In Creation, there is no force that is opposed to another force; there are no conflicting drives. Everything functions together in complete harmony.

 This is also the meaning of *Birkat Kohanim*, which includes the three blessings: “May the Lord bless you”; “May the Lord make His face shine on you”; and “May the Lord turn His face toward you.” The first blessing begins with the material realm, relating to abundance and protection from harm and loss. The second blessing focuses on the spiritual realm, on “the *mitzva* is a candle and the Torah is a light” (*Mishlei* 6:23), on God’s shining face and His graciousness. The third blessing focuses on the harmonious connection between the earth and heaven, between material desires and spiritual desires. When God turns His face toward us, then the end of the blessing will come into fruition: “and He will grant you peace.”

 Common to *Birkat Ha-Shalom* and *Birkat Kohanim* is the fundamental expression “the light of a king’s face” (*Mishlei* 16:15). In *Birkat Kohanim*, we find the expression, “May the Lord make His face shine on you,” while in *Birkat Ha-Shalom* we recite, “Bless us, our Father, all as one, in the light of Your face.” When the entire nation of Israel unites, when the individual desires of every member of the nation become interconnected through common forces in order to merit the light of the King of the World’s face, then all of our desires and personal affairs melt away. At that point, the desire to cling to the light of His face intensifies, and we merit being bathed in the light of the face of the King of all life.

 This is the moment when unity returns to the world, the exalted moment of peace and wholeness. On the one hand, this is the moment when we complete our *Amida* – the central part of prayer – as we stand before God. But on the other hand, we step out into the world armed with this blessing of peace. We set out from the realm of the harmonious unity to which we aspire and cross over into the daily grind, to the world of human activity. Through this process, we try our best to realize and put into practice this peace and wholeness in our daily lives.

 The condition for success in this aspiration is rooted in our ability to internalize the fact that the light of the King’s face that we are trying to achieve can only be given to all of us together – all as one. Through the unification of the aspirations of the entire nation of Israel together to crown God as King of the world, to make him a unique entity in the world, we too can merit the blessing of peace. It is a blessing that can only be realized when our national destiny – to invoke God’s name in the world – is fulfilled.

 The peace that God will grant us is the gift that God promised us when He committed to making us a unique entity in the world: “And who is like Your people Israel, a unique nation on earth.”

**Conclusion**

The aspiration to make God a unique entity in the world and to make the nation into a unique entity in the world is a reality that is quite far from being achieved and realized. Nevertheless, we are obligated to be aware of this goal, and to attempt to live our lives through a sense of responsibility to bring this vision into fruition.

 If we can manage to direct our path and our outlook to this unified vision, then we can begin to build bridges of love and connection between the various limbs of our nation. Thus we can help the nation advance toward the point when we can work together to build something stable and long-lasting.

 At the same time, we must remember that the purpose of the unity that we seek is not to blur the personal identity of each individual limb of the nation, as we emphasized above. The unity that we have described is the ability to understand that we can only achieve our common goal by harnessing these various different directions. We need each individual to act in his own way, each person through the desire to magnify God’s blessed name. “Between you and me the law will be clearly defined” (*Pesachim* 88a) – and God’s name will be praised. Every activity and action of each individual is another tile in the complete mosaic of the perfect world.

 Therefore, *Birkat Ha-Shalom* is also a call to God, before Whom the reality of “one thing God has spoken” is clear, to help us make our world more harmonious. If we are successful, our vision of the world, of “two things I have heard,” will be merit the blessing of unity.

 Perhaps some hope exists that at that time, some part of the reality that we experience will be cleaner, purer, and better able to illuminate us with the light of God’s face.

Translated by Daniel Landman

1. We will examine the *mitzva* of *tefillin* in its own right in the future. For now, we will focus only on the idea of the connection between loving God and loving Israel that is reflected in this *mitzva*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In our versions of the text, the separation is between “the Lord” and “alone.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Sephardim recite: “Torah and life, love and kindness, righteousness and compassion, blessing and peace.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)