

Finding G-d in our Personal World

Category: Shemos, Va'eira

The unintended impact of the mezuzah, and the strange word on its back.

A Mezuzah in France

Good Shabbos!

Back in the 1970s, the Rebbe sent shluchim to Lyon, France.

One of the first things they did when they got there was to organize Torah classes on the local college campus.

Among their first participants was a young female student whose family lived outside of town, and so she was invited to spend Shabbos at the shliach's house many times.

In those days, the Rebbe first came out with the Mezuzah Campaign. The shluchah, the shliach's wife, suggested that she put a mezuzah on the door of her studio apartment—and she agreed.

However, the mezuzah put up on her door didn't bring her much "luck."

First, when her friends would visit, they would warn her that a young single Jewish girl living alone in a French city declaring by means of the mezuzah that she was Jewish was, in that day and age, taking too much of a risk upon herself.

These fears took on a life of their own, to the point that one fine day, one of her friends got up and removed the "security threat" from her door on her own.

About two weeks later, when the young student came home to her apartment one day, she found a note from the post office notifying her that a package had arrived for her—but that since she wasn't home, the mailman had left the package with a neighbor on the third floor.

When she went up to get her package from the neighbor, a man of 70, he told her that he had been passing by on the staircase when the mailman had come—and

that when he saw the mailman not finding her home, he had offered the mailman to take the package for her.

He then gave her the package. But as she thanked him and got ready to leave, he suddenly said “Shalom!” to her in Hebrew.

“You’re Jewish?!” she asked him in amazement. Yes, he replied—and I have been meaning to ask you something: Why did you take the mezuzah down from your door two weeks ago?

When she started stammering, trying to explain to him the “security threat,” he said that he wanted to tell her something. And he told her the following:

“I am a Jew who lost my entire family in the Holocaust—my wife and children. Ever since then, I ran away from anything Jews as far as I could get—not Yom Kippur, not anything. I moved here and found the neighborhood farthest from any Jews, so that I would never bump into any of them.

“About one month ago, the elevator that I’d take every day to and from the third floor was not working. Having no choice, I had to take the stairs. When I got to the first floor, I suddenly saw a doorway with a mezuzah on it—a mezuzah that I had not seen for 30 years.

“It suddenly took me decades back in time. Memories of the past came to life inside me. I found myself standing next to the mezuzah for a half-hour, my hand on it, and me crying like a little child.

“From that day on, I stopped using the elevator. Every day, I would come and go from my apartment by foot just so I could stand by the mezuzah for a few minutes, to kiss it and bond with my thoughts.

“I thought that this was the one thing connecting me with my Judaism, with my Jewishness... so I was so shocked and depressed when, two weeks ago, I lost my mezuzah all over again—my Judaism that I so wanted to come back to and connect with...” (The Parshios with the Rebbe, Bereishis, pg. 142.)

G-d’s Mezuzah Name

Just as G-d created the universe in seven days, so too, G-d has seven “Names”—

descriptors which convey seven ways in which G-d conducts the universe.

Now, on the outside of a mezuzah, you'll find written one of G-d's Names, composed of the Hebrew letters shin, daled and yud. According to tradition, this Name is an acronym for "shomer dalsos yisroel"—"the Guardian of the Doors of Israel."

But what does this name really mean?

The Talmud (Tractate Chagigah) tells us that it represents G-d saying, "I said to My universe, 'Enough!' "—meaning to say that G-d created a limited, finite Universe.

For example, if the sun were just a bit bigger, or a bit stronger, or a bit closer to Earth, it would incinerate everything on Earth, just as there are other planets, both in our solar system and others, on which life is impossible because they are too close to the nearest star.

Another example is the oceans. If the oceans were to rise even a bit more, much of the world would be swamped by a massive flood.

As it turns out, our planet, and our entire universe, is precisely measured and laid out so that it can endure and carry on. In plain English, the Name of G-d on the mezuzah symbolizes how G-d keeps nature's borders firmly in place.

The Eternal Name

Now, when you open a mezuzah, the first verse reads, "Shma Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad" ("Hear O Israel, the L-rd is Our G-d, the L-rd is One).

In that verse, another Name of G-d appears, and twice. This Name symbolizes the infinitude of G-d—how He is past, present and future all at once. That means that if you look at the four letters that comprise that name—yud, hei, vav and hei—you will find the root word for three Hebrew words for "past" (hayah), "present" (hoveh), and "future" (yihyeh).

Thus, this Name of G-d contains all three words—and all three concepts—in one.

What does that mean?

Firstly, it means that G-d is infinite. Everything else in our universe is temporal—meaning that there was a time when that that matter or that energy didn't exist. Then, it came into existence, and it currently exists. Finally, there will come a time when it ceases to exist.

However, G-d is “past, present and future”—He is infinite and exists always and forever. And since He is infinite, He controls the past, present and future, too—meaning that He (or “It,” for you scientific types) is above time and space, and it is this Name of G-d that symbolizes how G-d is above time and space.

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

Introducing: G-d

In the Parshah of Vaera, right at the beginning, we read how G-d tells Moshe, “And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob with [the name] Almighty G-d, but [with] My name YHWH, I did not become known to them” (Shmos 6:3).

What exactly is this verse saying?

Here, G-d is saying to Moshe that My connection with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov could be described by the name shin, daled and yud—meaning that this Name symbolizes the limits of nature, the universe in which everything has a measure and an end.

That means that when it came to the Patriarchs, G-d did not do any miracles—Abraham did not split the sea, Isaac did not turn a stick into a snake, and Jacob did not turn water into blood. Rather, everything in their lives went according to nature. Yes, they did indeed succeed in many things; they became rich and they won battles. But it was all within the laws of nature.

That was not the case with Moshe Rabbeinu, with whom there was revealed the four-letter Name of G-d—meaning, the connection and relationship between Moshe and G-d was one that was above the laws of nature, a relationship based on miracles. G-d gave Moshe the power to change the laws of nature, like turning a stick into a snake or water into blood.

The Rebbe explains that in this verse, G-d wants to teach us what exile and redemption are.

The exile in Egypt actually began with Avraham, at which point the 400 years of exile began to be counted. Regarding that, G-d says that to Avraham, He will reveal the name shin, daled and yud—meaning, the behavior of the universe within the laws of nature.

And that behavior, that mode, is what exile is: no miracles, no openly seeing G-d.

So when did redemption begin? When G-d said to Moshe, “Therefore, say to the Sons of Israel, ‘I am Hashem’”—when G-d acts in a supernatural way, in a way of miracles, that is redemption.

And this, my friends, is true for our personal lives, too.

Seeing the Redemption

These two Names of G-d symbolize two situations in every individual’s life—one, when a person does not feel G-d in his or her personal life because he thinks he did it all himself, or when a person doesn’t feel G-d in his or her personal life because his suffering. In either case, the person is subjecting himself or herself to the laws of nature.

Now, says the Rebbe, when does redemption begin? When the person feels G-d in his or her personal life—when he or she gets up in the morning with strong faith in G-d, and when he or she sees G-d’s Hand guiding him or her in everything that he or she does. Then, for that day, that person will experience a personal redemption, a personal revelation of G-d.

Now, we are all waiting for the coming of Moshiach, when we will all experience the general, universal redemption of the Jewish Nation and the entire universe. But until then, every individual can experience his or her own personal exodus from Egypt.

Being “in Egypt,” of course, means to be worried about every little problem and not to feel G-d’s closeness—and, on the other hand, the “exodus from Egypt” in daily life means to feel that G-d is with you in every single moment. (Vaera 5721, Sichos Kodosh 5721, pg. 7-61.)

Good Shabbos!