



The Prime Minister in Tefillin

Small and simple ways we can help the effort to protect the Jewish people.

The Fallen Soldier's Tefillin

On the recent Memorial Day for the fallen soldiers in Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shared a photo of himself putting on tefillin. This was a historic first for Netanyahu; it's not the first time he has worn tefillin — several Chabad rabbis say they've personally put tefillin on with him (years ago, during a visit to China, my brother, who is the Chabad rabbi in Shanghai met him and helped his son Avner put on tefillin) — but he never released a picture of himself doing so. This is the first time Prime Minister Netanyahu is being publicly seen with tefillin.

The tefillin he used had a very special story. They belonged to a soldier named Moshiko Dweino, who fell in Gaza in 2014 during Operation Protective Edge. An anti-tank missile hit the D9 bulldozer he was in, killing him instantly. The only item that survived the attack was his tefillin.

Moshiko's mother lives in Jerusalem and has a close connection with the local Chabad emissary, Rabbi Or Ziv. She shared the story of her son's tefillin with him, mentioning how Moshiko always had his tefillin with him, helping his comrades put them on before entering Gaza.

Hearing that, Rabbi Ziv felt that Moshiko's tefillin should be used for a significant purpose, to honor Moshiko's memory. He suggested that Moshiko's mother send the tefillin to the Prime Minister, along with a letter asking him to wear them in her son's memory.

Through his connections with people close to Netanyahu, Rabbi Ziv managed to get the tefillin and the request to the Prime Minister. Indeed, on Israel's Memorial Day, Netanyahu put on the tefillin and wrote that he promised Moshiko's mother he would wear them in his

memory, which he did “reverently.”

Sanctifying G-d's Name

This week's Torah portion, Emor, is divided into two sections. The first part focuses on the commandments specific to the priests, as indicated by the opening words, “Say to the priests.” The second part is known as the “Parshat HaMoadot” (the section of the festivals), where the Torah enumerates all the annual holidays: Passover, the Counting of the Omer, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret.

Between these two sections, a very significant commandment appears: “And I shall be sanctified among the children of Israel.” What does this commandment mean? Maimonides explains in his Mishneh Torah (Yesodei Hatorah, Chapter 6) that there are commandments for which a person must be willing to give up their life. This means that if faced with the choice of worshipping idols or dying, one must choose death — and that sanctifies G-d's name. This act shows that one's faith in G-d is more important than life itself.

Rashi, in his commentary on this verse, provides an example from the story of Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah. These were three young men exiled from Jerusalem during the destruction of the First Temple by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. They were taken to his palace to be trained as advisors. One day, Nebuchadnezzar erected a massive golden statue symbolizing the eternal rule of Babylon and decreed that everyone must bow to it when the music played. He warned that anyone who refused would be thrown into a fiery furnace. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah chose not to bow, and as a result, were thrown into the furnace. A miracle occurred, and they were not burned. Eventually, the king ordered the furnace to be cooled and had them removed from it. Their devotion, along with this miraculous rescue, caused a great sanctification of God's name.

This concept, in Hebrew, is known as Kiddush Hashem. In fact, this helps explain why Moshiach is a descendant of the tribe of Judah.

Why Was Judah Chosen

The Talmud recounts that “there were four elders sitting at the gateway of Rabbi Yehoshua's house... Rabbi Akiva asked them, ‘Why did Judah merit kingship?’ Since the time of King David, the monarchy in Israel was from the tribe of Judah, and even after the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish people strove to ensure that its leaders came from the House of David. Moshiach too, will be from the House of

David. Rabbi Akiva's question was: Why specifically did the tribe of Judah merit this?

The first answer given was, "Because he admitted his guilt regarding Tamar." In the story of Judah and his daughter-in-law Tamar, recounted in Parashat Vayeshev, when it was revealed that she was pregnant, Judah admitted that he was the father. Rabbi Akiva responded, "Is one rewarded for committing a sin?"

The sages proposed another answer: "Because he saved his brother from death." When Simeon and Levi wanted to kill Joseph, it was Judah who suggested selling him instead, thereby saving him. Rabbi Akiva responded, "The act of saving is enough to atone for the sale itself," (but not deserving of a reward.) The act of selling Joseph was a sin in itself, and Judah's intervention would atone for that act, but this still doesn't explain why Judah was granted eternal kingship, including the eventual coming of Moshiach.

A third suggestion was offered: "Because of his humility." Where do we see Judah's humility? When Joseph wanted to take Benjamin as a slave, it was Judah who stood up to the Egyptian ruler, saying, "Now, let your servant stay instead of the boy, as a slave to my lord, and let the boy go back with his brothers." Judah was willing to become a slave in Benjamin's place, showing his humility and responsibility. Rabbi Akiva replied, "Wasn't he fulfilling his guarantee?" Judah had promised his father, "I will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible," so he was obligated to act this way. This, too, doesn't fully explain why Judah merited kingship.

Finally, the sages turned to Rabbi Akiva and asked, "Teach us, our master." Rabbi Akiva provided a profound answer: "Because he sanctified G-d's name." Where did the tribe of Judah sanctify G-d's name? "When the tribes stood at the sea, each one said, 'I will go first,' and then the tribe of Judah leapt forward... as it says, 'When Israel came out of Egypt, Judah became His sanctuary.'" Judah sanctified G-d's name at the sea.

It was due to the self-sacrifice of the tribe of Judah, led by Nachshon ben Aminadav. Because of their act, the miraculous splitting of the Red Sea occurred, sanctifying G-d's name throughout the world. This is the type of sanctification of G-d's name we are commanded to do in our Torah portion.

For Regular People

However, such acts of sanctifying G-d's name, like the one performed

by Judah at the Red Sea, are rare and exceptional. For most people, the Talmud provides examples that are more accessible and relevant to everyday life. Sanctifying G-d's name doesn't always require jumping into fire or water.

The Gemara says that a person should endeavor that "the name of Heaven become beloved through you." When a person studies Torah, conducts themselves with dignity, speaks kindly to others, deals honestly in business, and is trustworthy, people will say about him, "Look at this individual who studies Torah — how wonderful a person he is." That's a sanctification of G-d's name. (Yoma 86a - according to the version in Ein Yaakov).

In simple terms, a Jew who behaves well — treating others with kindness and respect, acting with integrity, being truthful in business dealings, and so on — elicits admiration and respect. People see such a person and think, "This is what it means to be a Jew. Look at how honest and upright they are." This is a sanctification of G-d's name.

So, what the Prime Minister did this week is also an example of sanctifying God's name. By publicly displaying his faith and commitment to mitzvos, he demonstrated that a leader in a Jewish state draws his strength from G-d. This is a true Kiddush Hashem.

The Right President

In 1963, Israel's second president, Yitzchak Ben-Zvi, passed away suddenly. Immediately after his passing, Zalman Shazar was invited to a meeting with then-Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion. Ben-Gurion said, "We need to elect a new president, and you will be that president." They say that Ben-Gurion told Shazar, "The president of Israel should be a Jew who can walk down the street during Sukkot holding a lulav and etrog, and therefore, you are suitable for this role." He said this because Shazar came from a Chabad origin and was a traditional Jew; Ben Gurion felt that he would therefore be the best person to serve in that capacity. (Nasi V'Chassid, p. 190).

So, if the Prime Minister shares a photo of himself putting on tefillin on Memorial Day for fallen IDF soldiers, it is certainly a sanctification of G-d's name.

Recently, during a class, a young dentist asked me what he could do to improve the situation in Israel and combat the rising antisemitism on American campuses. He already put on tefillin. He said that he didn't want to start debating with his patients about Israel's situation, even though, while drilling someone's tooth, he could say whatever he

wanted, and the patient would likely agree just to have the procedure over with.

I told him that with a mezuzah on the door of his office, people will know he is Jewish, and when he will treat them with respect and serve them with honesty, they will come to appreciate him. Then, when they read lies and exaggerations about Jews in the newspaper, they will think, "This dentist I know is an honest and good person." This might make them question the negative things they read and motivate them to seek the truth. In doing so, this dentist sanctifies G-d's name and the name of the Jewish people.

My friends, the Rebbe often noted that no one is being asked to jump into fire or water. The sanctification of G-d's name we need to achieve comes from our everyday actions. Jewish pride and behavior that honors both the Jew and Judaism constitute a true Kiddush Hashem.