

The Confidence of G-D's Tefillin | Dvar Torah Ki Savo

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“The LORD will establish you for a holy people to Himself, as He has sworn to you; if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God, and walk in His ways. And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the name of the LORD is called upon you; and they shall be afraid of you.” - Deuteronomy 28:9-10

Before Moses delivers a litany of curses upon the Israelites he offers some words of hope and blesses the people. In summary, Moses tells the people that if they follow the word of G-D all kinds of good things will happen for them. *“You will be blessed in the city and you will be blessed in the field.”* And so on.

The incentive to be good is strong. One of the more powerful verses of blessing describes how we will be perceived by the nations of the world if we are obedient to G-D's word. The verse tells us that people of the earth will “see G-D's name upon us” and they will be afraid of us.

What is this fear? Why will the nations fear us? What is this name of G-D that arouses this fear?

The Talmud (Brachos 6a) says that R' Eliezer teaches us that this “name of G-D” is the *Tefillin* that is worn upon the head. One has to wonder what R' Eliezer means with this statement. Does he mean that if we wear our *tefillin* we will be protected from persecution and ridicule? Are the *tefillin* a magical talisman? Is it that simple? Is that even possible?

There are photos of great Jewish martyrs during the Holocaust wearing their *Tefillin*. It seems that the Nazis did not fear our *tefillin*. What happened? Was it just a matter of us not being worthy of the blessing? Exactly what is R' Eliezer saying?

Rabbi Lamm explains R' Eliezer's statement by observing the context of the Talmudic passage. Immediately after R' Eliezer says that the "name of G-D" upon us is the *tefillin* that is worn upon the head, the Talmud wonders about G-D's *tefillin*.

The Talmud asks: And what is written in G-D's *tefillin*? In G-D's *tefillin* we would find a verse lauding the Jewish people. "Who is like the Jewish people, one nation upon the earth?" Meaning, our *tefillin* speak to G-D's unity as expressed in the four chapters we place inside, accordingly G-D's *tefillin* speak to our unity. It's a symbiotic relationship. We express G-D's unity and G-D expresses ours.

In a novel twist, Rabbi Lamm proclaims that R' Eliezer was not actually referring to our *tefillin* at all! Rather he was referring to G-D's *tefillin*! That is the context of the *sugya*. In other words, when we live the maxim of G-D's *tefillin* then the people of the earth will fear us. What is that maxim? That we have unity and that we are a singular nation.

When we are comfortable and confident in our singularity we succeed. R' Eliezer is teaching us to be strong in our ability to stand on our own. If we can stand strong on our own, we inspire awe from the people of the earth. When we are not vying for approval or desperately trying to assimilate, we are demonstrating to the world the message of G-D's *tefillin*. However, if do try to leave our Jewishness at home, or worse in the trash heap of history, the people of the earth will not find anything awesome about the Jewish people.

The idea is that when people are confident in their convictions and believe what they are doing is right, they earn the respect of others. Of course, this only applies when one is also respectful and kind to the others. Acting zealously because we think we are right and everyone else is wrong will undoubtedly result in treatment in kind. If we are hateful toward others or act in a manner that breeds hate, we can expect to be treated at least as badly by those others. But there is a way to act in confidence with respect for others. This is exactly what R' Eliezer was trying to say. When we are

doing the right thing, with the confidence of G-D's *tefillin* we earn the awe and reverence of others.

This is all on a national level. When the Jewish people as a whole act the way they are supposed to act, and we do so with confidence and pride, we gain the respect of others.

As much as it applies to us as a people, it applies to us as individuals as well. We can see this from the man who taught us this lesson in the Talmud. It's not just our confidence as a nation but also confidence as individual people.

R' Eliezer lived this maxim. He found himself on the opposing side of the rabbis of his generation time and time again. His opinions are disproportionately unpopular. R' Eliezer is most well known for the incident regarding the *tanur shel achnai* where his opinion differed from the other sages. But he stood by his convictions even inviting nature itself to testify on his behalf. It did not matter that his colleagues had the numbers. R' Eliezer believed he was right. Ultimately, none of that mattered as we follow the majority in rabbinic disputes of halacha. Indeed, R' Eliezer paid a price as he lived out his days in isolation as punishment for not acceding to the rabbis. But R' Eliezer stood tall and true to his convictions. R' Eliezer's strength and confidence shines through this and other episodes in the Talmud. He lived the ideas G-D's *tefillin*.

As a people we struggle with this. On the one hand we have adapted and adopted from our surroundings over the course of our collective history. There is tension between this chameleon-like attitude toward our environment and our ancient traditions that sometimes put us at odds with our neighbors and their ideas. It requires us to dance around the raindrops sometimes. But we must remember that we believe we have the truth. We must be careful to be respectful and friendly to all who are not members of our group while we stand by our convictions with confidence.

Within Judaism we have subgroups as well. Each is entitled to believe it is doing Judaism the right way. However our confidence in our subgroup

cannot allow us lose respect and courtesy to our co-religionists from other subgroups. If we pervert our confidence in our way of life with hate and demonization of others our confidence is mere braggadocio.

We certainly should feel that our way of life is the right way to live. Some subgroups excel at this while other languish in self-loathing. I think the least confident subgroup in Judaism is Modern Orthodoxy. This is not a criticism of the Modern Orthodox theology, rather it is a reflection of a sad reality that too many Modern Orthodox Jews feel second class. All subgroups should feel confident that they are doing G-D's will. All subgroups should be respectful of the other subgroups. Modern Orthodoxy should be proud of their way of life. There is no need to constantly defer to other subgroups. Modern Orthodoxy can be vibrant and viable in our world.

When Modern Orthodoxy can live confidently it will flourish. It will find G-D's *tefillin* are easily discerned among Modern Orthodox Jews. With the deftness that only Modern Orthodoxy can possess, its people will inspire awe and wonder among the people of the earth, not least of which, the rest of the Jewish people.

Good Shabbos