



# NORTHWEST YESHIVA HIGH SCHOOL

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## Thoughts on the Parasha

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### Parshat KiTisa 5768

#### ***The Components of the Ketoret***

**And Hashem said to Moshe: Take fragrances for yourself – balsam, onycha, galbanum, and pure frankincense. Each should be the same weight. (Shemot 30:44)**

In this *pasuk*, Moshe is instructed in the compounding of the *Ketoret*. This mixture of fragrances was burned, daily, in the *Mishcan*. The *pasuk* lists four ingredients for this mixture. In reality, the mixture contained an additional seven ingredients. In total, eleven components were required to create the *Ketoret*. Maimonides explains although these additional ingredients are not recorded in the Torah, they were specified to Moshe at Sinai. This is based upon the comments of the Talmud in Tractate Keritot. According to Maimonides, all the components are strictly dictated by Torah law.<sup>1</sup> However, only four fragrances are mentioned explicitly in the Chumash. The question is obvious. Why are four of the eleven ingredients given special treatment and actually recorded in the Torah?

Many of the commentaries discuss this issue. Rav Eliyahu of Vilna, the Vilna Gaon, offers one interesting explanation. The Gaon bases his explanation on an apparent contradiction in the wording of the Chumash. In our *pasuk*, the Chumash refers to the four ingredients as *samim*. In the above translation, this term is interpreted to mean fragrances. The *Ketoret* is also discussed briefly in Parshat Terumah. Hashem instructs Moshe to collect contributions from the nation for the construction of the *Mishcan*. Hashem provides Moshe with a list of required items. Hashem commands Moshe to secure the ingredients for the *Ketoret*. Specifically, Moshe is commanded to secure *besamim* for the *Ketoret* of *samim*.

The Gaon asks a simple question. In the above *pasuk*, the Torah refers to the *Ketoret* as a compound of *samim*. Yet, the Chumash, in Parshat Terumah, describes the compound as including a class of ingredients identified as *besamim*. If the *Ketoret* is to be composed of *samim*, what is this other class of ingredients referred to as *besamim*?

The Gaon explains that there is a difference between the terms *samim* and *besamim*. *Samim* are fragrances that are the essence of a compound. In contrast, the term *besamim* refers to ingredients that enhance the basic mixture. *Besamim*, alone, are not the essence of the compound.

Based on this distinction, the Gaon of Vilna answers the original question. The *Ketoret* is defined as a mixture of *samim*. Only the four ingredients, specified in the *pasuk*, are classified as *samim*. These ingredients are the essence of the *Ketoret*. However, seven other *besamim* are required. These *besamim* do not define the fundamental

character of the mixture. Therefore, they are not explicitly cited by the *pasuk*. Instead, these additional ingredients enhance the mixture. Their role is mentioned in *Parshat Terumah*. They are properly identified as *besamim*—enhancements.

The Gaon provides a proof for his thesis. In order to create the mixture of the *Ketoret*, the ingredients are combined in a specified ratio. The amount of each ingredient is determined by *halachah*. For each of the four *samim* a measurement of seventy *maneh* was required. For the other ingredients—the *besamim*—the measurement was smaller. The Gaon explains that the larger measurement required for the *samim* reflects their essential role in the mixture. The smaller measurement for the *besamim* corresponds with the subsidiary role of these ingredients in the mixture.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***Moshe Observed the Knot of Hashem's Tefilin***

**And I will remove My hand and you will see My back. And My face will not be seen. (Shemot 33:23)**

Moshe ascends Mount Sinai. He asks Hashem to reveal to him His essential nature. Hashem responds that a material being is not capable of grasping the Divine essence. However, Hashem agrees to allow Moshe to see His back. This apparently means that although we cannot attain an absolute understanding of Hashem, we are capable of some lower level of comprehension. This more mundane understanding is represented as seeing Hashem's back.<sup>3</sup>

The Talmud comments on this episode in Tractate Berachot. The Talmud explains that Moshe saw the knot of the *tefilin* worn by Hashem on His head.<sup>4</sup> These comments are difficult to understand. Hashem is not physical. He cannot be conceived as a being wearing *tefilin*. Perhaps, this objection can be overcome by positing that the Talmud is not suggesting that Hashem is material. The Talmud is merely stating that Moshe—in his conception of Hashem—envisioned Him wearing *tefilin*. This interpretation only engenders a different problem. Maimonides explains that Moshe achieved the highest possible understanding of Hashem. Whereas most people must struggle to understand Hashem in a manner that does any attribute material trait Him, Moshe's understanding did not involve any corporeal element.<sup>5</sup> So, how can our Sages claim that Moshe perceived Hashem wearing *tefilin*?

Rashi, in his commentary on the Talmud, provides some

2 Rabbaynu Eliyahu of Vilna, *Commentary on Shir HaShirim* 5:1.

3 See: Rabbaynu Ovadia Sforno, *Commentary on Sefer Shemot* 33:23.

4 Mesechet Berachot 7a.

5 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Moreh Nevuchim*, Volume 1, Chapter 5.

1 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Klai HaMikdash 2:1-2.

direction in interpreting the Sages' comments. He refers to a previous text. In this text, the Talmud explains that Hashem wears *tefilin*. The Talmud also deals with the contents of Hashem's *tefilin*. The Talmud explains that these *tefilin* contain the passage, "Who is like Your nation Israel? They are a singular people in the land".<sup>6,7</sup>

This text is also difficult to understand. However, it provides an essential element needed to explain Moshe's vision. In order to appreciate the message of the Talmud, Moshe's vision must be placed in context. Bnai Yisrael had committed the sin of creating and worshiping the *Egel*—the Golden Calf. This sin strained the relationship between Hashem and His nation. Moshe wished to reestablish the intimate connection between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael. In this context, Moshe asked Hashem for a revelation of His nature. Hashem responded by showing Moshe the knot of His *tefilin*. The meaning of this vision is not immediately clear from the Talmud's comments. However, it is clear from the Torah's account of the vision and its aftermath that this vision gave Moshe the knowledge he needed to mend the relationship. With the new understanding attained from this vision, he was able to reestablish the relationship damaged by the sin of the *Egel*.

In this context, let us reconsider the comments of the Talmud. The Sages are explaining that Hashem's *tefilin* contain a passage that affirms the unique relationship between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael. In other words, the *tefilin* represent the bond between Hashem and His people.

Moshe could not see the front of Hashem. He could not fully understand the nature of Hashem. Also, he could not view the front of Hashem's *tefilin*. This seems to mean that the relationship between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael is a consequence of the Divine essence. Moshe's understanding of the relationship was necessarily limited. No mortal—even Moshe—can grasp the Divine essence. Without a full understanding of Hashem's nature, Moshe could not completely grasp the relationship. However, he *could* see the knot of the *tefilin*. He was able to study the relationship as an emanation or effect of the Divine essence.

An analogy will help illustrate this concept. Let us compare Hashem to fire. Humanity's ancient ancestors, though unsophisticated, discovered fire. They did not understand the scientific nature of combustion, but they could see the effect of fire and heat on different substances. Observing and studying these phenomena did not require a complete comprehension of fire in itself. Similarly, Moshe could not understand the ultimate nature of Hashem. Yet, he could contemplate the relationship between Hashem and Bnai Yisrael. This understanding enabled Moshe to appeal properly to Hashem and beseech Him for forgiveness for His nation.

We now understand that Moshe's vision did not involve any corporeal element. Our Sages are utilizing imagery to communicate an important message regarding Moshe's experience at Sinai.

## Moshe's Glow and Covering

**And when Moshe came before Hashem to speak with Him, he would remove the covering until he went out. And he would go out and speak to Bnai Yisrael telling them what had been commanded. And the nation saw that the skin of Moshe's face glowed. And Moshe would restore the covering over his face until he came to speak with Him. (Shemot 34:34-35)**

Moshe ascended Mount Sinai a final time. On this occasion, he achieved a profound understanding of Hashem and His ways. This knowledge is the most advanced understanding of Hashem that can be acquired by a human being.

The Torah explains that when Moshe descended from the mountain his face "glowed". At first, Aharon and the people were afraid to approach Moshe. However, Moshe called to Aharon and Bnai Yisrael to approach him. He then spoke with Aharon, the leaders, and the nation. Upon completion of this address, Moshe placed a covering over his face. This covering hid the light that glowed from his face.

Our passages explain the role of this covering. Whenever Moshe communicated with Hashem, he removed the covering. Most commentaries maintain that the covering remained removed while Moshe delivered Hashem's message to the people. After Moshe completed his presentation, he restored the covering.<sup>8</sup> Moshe's face remained covered until he next communicated with Hashem. Gershonides seems to offer a different explanation of Moshe's use of the covering. According to him, the covering was restored as soon as Moshe finished speaking with Hashem. When Moshe spoke with the people, his face was covered.<sup>9</sup>

The commentaries offer various interpretations of the glow and the covering. Most understand the Torah's account literally; Moshe's face actually beamed with light. Therefore, the "covering" is understood in the literal sense.<sup>10</sup>

However, Gershonides takes a different approach to explaining this narrative. He suggests that neither the beams of light nor the covering should be interpreted literally. Instead, they are to be understood figuratively. In order to understand Gershonides' interpretation, it is important to remember that he maintains that the figurative "covering" was only removed during Moshe's communication with Hashem. During his address to Bnai Yisrael, the covering was restored.

Gershonides begins by explaining that Moshe achieved the highest possible level of prophecy. He explains that Moshe's prophetic ability developed over time. At Sinai, Hashem revealed to Moshe the most profound truths a human being can grasp. This implies that Sinai represented the full maturation of Moshe as a prophet. He was at the zenith of his prophetic power.

Moshe's advanced level of prophecy expressed itself in

<sup>8</sup> Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), *Commentary on Sefer Shemot* 34:33. Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, 34:33.

<sup>9</sup> Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), *Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 440.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Rabbaynu Avraham ibn Ezra, *Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, 34:33.

<sup>6</sup> Divrai HaYamim I, 17:21.

<sup>7</sup> Mesechet Berachot 6a.

various ways. Maimonides outlines the differences between Moshe and other prophets in his *Mishne Torah*.<sup>11</sup> One of these differences is that other prophets can only receive prophecy after adequate mental preparation. The prophet must enter into an appropriate state of mind in order for prophecy to be experienced. In this state, the individual sheds all attachment with the material world. An inner peace and calm must also be reached. This is not an easily achieved state. The difficulty of attaining and maintaining this state limits the opportunity of the prophet to receive prophecy.

In contrast to all other prophets, Moshe could achieve prophecy at any time. He was always in the state requisite for prophecy. He possessed a super-human ability to detach himself from the material world and focus on Hashem.<sup>12</sup> Gershonides asserts that this distinction between Moshe and other prophets can be expressed in an even more basic manner: Other prophets are generally focused on the material world. However, they have the ability to temporarily rise above this orientation. In order to achieve prophecy, they forcibly break away from their material orientation and ascend into a spiritual state. Tremendous effort is required to shed their orientation with the material and focus on the spiritual. By contrast, Moshe ultimately *altered* his basic orientation. When Moshe descended from Sinai, he was no longer similar to other human beings or prophets. He was completely focused on the spiritual. He was entirely detached from the material world. In other words, Moshe was innately focused on the spiritual.

We can now understand Gershonides' interpretation of Moshe's "glow" and his "covering". Moshe descended from Sinai. He was no longer like other human beings. He was an essentially spiritual being. Aharon and the Bnai Yisrael sensed Moshe's complete detachment from the material world. The "glow" that emanated from Moshe was this super-human spiritual focus. Aharon and the nation reacted with awe and could not approach him. Neither could Moshe easily communicate with the material world and its inhabitants.

This created a problem. Moshe was Hashem's prophet. His responsibility was to deliver the divine message to the people. Yet, a barrier now existed between Moshe and the nation. His very perfection interfered with his relationship with Bnai Yisrael. The people were in awe of Moshe and could not approach him. Moshe no longer related to the world he was commanded to instruct. In order for Moshe to communicate with the people, he was forced to reenter the material realm. For Moshe, this required an act of will. He was required to suspend some element of his spiritual orientation. This reorientation to the material is described as a "covering". The covering symbolizes Moshe hiding his true nature. Moshe hid an element of his spiritual self in order to communicate with the nation.<sup>13</sup>

11 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah, chapter 7.

12 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Yesodai HaTorah, 7:46.

13 Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), *Commentary on Sefer Shemot*, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 440.

## The Torah requires a Balance between the Sacred and Material

**This they shall give, everyone who goes through the counting: half a shekel according to the sacred shekel. Twenty gerahs equal one shekel; half of [such] a shekel shall be an offering to Hashem. (Shemot 30:13)**

In the opening passages of this week's *parasha*, Moshe is commanded to conduct a census of the nation. Moshe is provided with specific directions for the conducting of the census. These instructions deal with two issues: who is to be counted and how to conduct the census. The census is to include all males over the age of twenty. The method is unusual. Moshe is instructed that he is not to directly count the people. Instead, he is to instruct each male over the age of twenty to contribute a half of a sacred *shekel* to the *Mishcan*—the Tabernacle. These coins will be counted and the number of coins will correspond with the population of males over the age of twenty.

Nachmanides asks two interesting questions regarding this instruction. First, it makes reference of a coin called a "*shekel*." The term "*shekel*" means "measurement." Why is this name used to refer to this coin? Second, the amount to be contributed is half of a "sacred" *shekel*. What were these sacred *shekel* coins? What made them sacred?

Nachmanides addresses both issues. He begins with a key premise, suggesting that Moshe minted his own coin. He created the *shekel*. Why is the coin referred to as a "*shekel*" or "measure"? Moshe was scrupulous in his minting of this coin. He made sure that each coin contained exactly twenty gerahs of silver. The coin is referred to as a "*shekel*," or "measure," because each coin was a full *measure* of silver.

Why was the coin referred to as a "sacred" *shekel*? Nachmanides suggests that the coin was created to be used for various *mitzvot*. It was to be used for the redemption of the first born and the payment of various other amounts due to the *Mishcan*. Because of the coin's role in the fulfillment of *mitzvot*, it is referred to as the "sacred" *shekel*.

Nachmanides applies a similar interpretation of the term "sacred" to explain another issue. He notes the Sages refer to *Ivrit*—Hebrew—as the "sacred language". Why is *Ivrit* regarded as sacred? Nachmanides suggests that because *Ivrit* is the language in which the Torah, the Prophets, and other sacred works are composed, it deserves to be referred to as sacred. These works are sacred. *Ivrit* is the language in which their messages are communicated. Therefore, *Ivrit* is a "sacred" language.

Nachmanides also notes other reasons for referring to *Ivrit* as sacred,<sup>14</sup> noting that his position differs from that of Maimonides. Maimonides offers a rather surprising explanation of the term "sacred language". Maimonides explains that we should not erroneously assume that *Ivrit* is referred to as "sacred" as a result of the language's association with the Jewish people. Instead, the language is referred

14 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), *Commentary on Sefer Beresheit* 30:13.

to as sacred because of an important characteristic. Classical *Ivrit* lacks terms for the sexual organs, the sexual act, and for human waste and feces—all of which the language refers to through euphemism. Maimonides reasons that the exclusion of terminology for these items and actions from the language *elevates Ivrit*. This characteristic is the basis of its sanctity.<sup>15</sup>

Maimonides' position seems somewhat prudish. It seems he is suggesting that it is improper to directly refer to the sexual organs and basic bodily functions. These actions and things are stripped of names and are referred to through euphemism, thus rendering *Ivrit* sacred through its dismissal of the basic bodily functions and sexuality!

This deduction, however, is not consistent with Maimonides' general treatment of sexual issues. He deals with sexual issues in a straightforward, unabashed manner.<sup>16</sup> It seems strange that he should endorse a seemingly pedantic attitude towards sexuality and basic bodily functions.

In order to understand Maimonides' position, it is important to consider his comment more carefully. He explains that *Ivrit* is sacred because of the structure of the language. It employs euphemisms for references to the sexual organs, the sexual act, and for bodily wastes. What does this structural characteristic tell us about the design and objective of the language? Apparently, although the language is remarkably precise and effective for the communication of ideas, it is ill-adapted for a discussion of sexuality. In other words, the language facilitates the exchange of *most* ideas but hinders communication focused of sexuality.

Why is this characteristic significant? How does it “elevate” the language to sanctity? Although the Torah favors a healthy and balanced attitude towards sexuality, it discourages us from focusing our attention on the sexual. The Torah recognizes that sexuality is a basic component of human nature. It should not be repressed or censored through primitive and unhealthy taboos. But the Torah also recognizes that fascination with sexuality can become obsessive. It can dominate our thoughts and interests. A balance is required. We should not repress our human drive but we should not become obsessively fixated on the sexual. The structure of *Ivrit* reflects this balance. It is well-suited for the communication of ideas and *this* should be our focus—the pursuit of wisdom and knowledge. It is ill-suited for discussion of the sexual. This is an area in which we must maintain balance. It cannot become the focus of our attention.

This concept of balance is reflected in an interesting comment by Rabbaynu Bachya. Rabbaynu Bachya asks why we are commanded to provide *half* of a sacred *shekel* to the *Mishcan*. Why not provide a *full shekel*? There are many well-known answers to this question, but Rabbaynu Bachya's response is one of the most unique. He explains that the use of half of a *shekel* is intended to communicate a message: We cannot completely give ourselves over to the sacred. We must *balance* our devotion to the sacred with a devotion to the material world.

This seems to be a remarkable statement! Should we not wholly devote our lives to elevating ourselves to the highest possible spiritual level? Should we not make every effort to escape our attachment to the temporal, material world? Rabbaynu Bachya responds that this attitude is oversimplified; we are material creatures and we cannot neglect, ignore, or deny the material element of our nature. If we attempt to focus exclusively on our spiritual needs and neglect our material needs and desires, then we will secure neither. We cannot elevate ourselves spiritually unless we adequately address our material and physical needs.

Rabbaynu Bachya suggests that this idea is reflected in the manner in which we are instructed to observe our festivals. *Halachah* requires that we apportion the day between spiritual and material endeavors. We are to spend half of the day in prayer, study, and spiritual pursuits. The other half of the day is to be devoted to the festival meals and material indulgences.<sup>17</sup> It is strange that the festival—a sacred day—is to be used for material indulgences! Rabbaynu Bachya responds that addressing our material needs and desires does not detract from the spiritual element of the festival day. On the contrary, when our material needs and desires are addressed, we are better prepared to pursue spiritual ends.<sup>18</sup>

If we take seriously Rabbaynu Bachya's comments, they have many important implications. Let us identify one of these. We must provide our children with an education that prepares them for adulthood and independence. We can only execute this responsibility by providing them with an education that will enable them to support themselves. If, as adults, our children cannot provide for their material needs, then they cannot be expected to achieve their spiritual potential.

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15 Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Moreh Nevuchim*, Volume 3, Chapter 8.

16 See, for example, Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) *Mishne Torah*, Hilchot Essurai Beya 21:9.

17 Mesechet Pesachim 68b.

18 Rabbaynu Bachya, *Commentary on Sefer Shemot* 30:13.

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