

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Bo
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bo – The first mitzvah

In this week's Parasha of Bo, we read about the first mitzvah given to the Jewish nation, the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh – the sanctification of the new moon and the setting up of the Jewish calendar.

“This month shall be for you the beginning of the months; it shall be for you the first of the months of the year” (Shmot 12:2).

In his first comment on the Torah, Rashi, citing R' Yitzchak,¹ questions why Hashem did not begin the Torah with the verse quoted above. If the Torah is a guidebook of commandments, then surely it would be more appropriate to begin with the first mitzvah instead of the story of the creation.

R' Yitzchak concludes that the Torah began with Hashem creating the world in order to teach us that the land belongs to Him, and He can apportion it as He wishes. When the nations of the world accuse the Jewish People of stealing the Land of Israel (as they are want to do from time to time!), the Jewish people can rely on the book of Breishit as authority that the Land belongs to us.²

Actually, the Torah does include a few other mitzvot prior to the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh – including the mitzvah to be fruitful and multiply (pru u'rvu), the mitzvah of brit milah and the prohibition against eating the gid hanashe (sciatic nerve). However, though these mitzvot are mentioned earlier in the Torah, the Jewish People were not commanded to perform them until Har Sinai. Therefore, historically, the first mitzvah that Hashem commanded to the nation was this mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh in our Parasha.

The basic meaning of the Hebrew word mitzvah is 'commandment'. It is also related to the Aramaic word 'tzavta', which means to attach or join. Since we are performing Hashem's will when we perform mitzvot, we thereby create a relationship with Him and attach ourselves to Him in this way.

The kabbalah teaches³ that Hashem created the world through his unpronounceable four-letter name: a 'י', followed by a 'ה' and then a 'ו' followed by a 'ה'. The first two letters of Hashem's name represent His hidden aspect in the world. The second two letters of Hashem's name represent His revealed aspect in the world. Note that the second half of the name is almost the same as the first half. The only difference is that the first half has a 'י' (which is the smallest of the letters – hence representing Hashem's hidden aspect) and the second half has a 'ו' (which looks like a yud that has been extended downwards – hence representing the aspect of Hashem that is drawn down and revealed in this world). Hashem's four-letter name is embedded within all aspects of creation. Here are some examples⁴:

- The text of the Torah is made up of four parts – the letters, the crowns, the vowels and the tunes. The vowels and the tunes (known as 'trop') are 'hidden' since they do not appear in the text of the Torah⁵. They therefore represent the first two letters of Hashem's name – the 'י' and the 'ה' (i.e. the

¹ Some commentators identify R' Yitzchak as Rashi's father.

² R' Yitzchak's proof is not directed at the nations of the world because they do not necessarily believe in the Torah's account of creation, nor do they read Rashi. Rather, it is speaking to the Jewish people, to reassure us of our right to Eretz Yisrael. If we are strong in our beliefs the nations of the world have less power over us. (See Rashi to Tehillim 111:6.)

³ The following is based on the writings of the Arizal, as heard from Rabbi Yaakov Zalman Labinsky.

⁴ The second and third examples are mentioned by Rabbi Labinsky. However, the division into 'revealed' and 'hidden' is my own understanding.

⁵ They do appear in a printed Chumash, but they do not appear in the Torah scroll itself.

hidden aspect of His name). In contrast, the form of the letters themselves and the crowns that appear above the letters are actually written on the scroll. In this sense they are revealed. Thus, they represent the last two letters of Hashem's name which represent Hashem's revealed aspect.

- The four levels of creation – mineral, plant, animal and human. Animals and humans represent a more revealed aspect of life (the second half of Hashem's name). Minerals and plants have less life-force; thus, they represent the more hidden aspects (the first half of His name).
- The four seasons - spring, summer, autumn⁶ and winter. Spring and summer represent the more revealed aspect of nature as plants bloom and grow. Autumn and winter represent the more hidden aspects.

Hashem's four-part name also relates to the word 'mitzvah' itself. We can understand this connection by explaining another kabbalistic concept – known as the 'at-bash' method. According to kabbalah, the first half of the aleph bet represents the more hidden aspect and the second half of the aleph bet represents the more revealed aspect.⁷ The at-bash method demonstrates this through swapping the first letter of the aleph bet with the last letter, swapping the second letter with the second-last letter and so on. For instance, we swap א with ת, we swap ב with ש, and we swap ג with ר etc. Used correctly, this method reveals concepts that are hidden in Hebrew words.

The word mitzvah (מצוה) and Hashem's four-letter name share the same final two letters. What about the first two letters? Remarkably, when we apply the at-bash method to the first two letters of the word mitzvah ('מ' and 'צ') they convert to 'ו' and 'ה' which are exactly the same letters as the first half of Hashem's name. Thus, the first half of Hashem's name (which is the hidden aspect, as discussed earlier) is literally hidden in the first half of the word mitzvah. And the second half of Hashem's name (which is the revealed aspect) is openly revealed as being the same as the second half of the word 'mitzvah'! Isn't that amazing?!

One lesson we can extract from the fact that Hashem's name appears in the word 'mitzvah' – is that Hashem reveals Himself through His mitzvot.⁸ In other words, by performing His mitzvot, we are binding ourselves to His name!

This amazing manifestation of Hashem's name is also concealed in individual mitzvot. For instance,⁹ when we give tzedakah to a poor person, we are literally acting out Hashem's name. The small letter 'ו' is represented by the small coin; the first letter 'ה' is represented by our hand (we have five fingers and the letter heh has the gematria or numerical value of five); our outstretched arm looks like the letter 'ו' and the receiving hand of the poor person represents the second letter 'ה'.

The practical message from this kabbalistic analysis is that the mitzvot are a wonderful, Divinely revealed way for attaching ourselves to Hashem. Whenever we perform a mitzvah, we are fulfilling Hashem's will. In doing so, we are developing our relationship with Him and binding ourselves to our Creator. And connecting to Hashem is our primary purpose and most fundamental mission in this world.

Let's try something this week:

1. Try to keep in mind that every mitzvah we perform is a fulfilment of Hashem's will! And the act of fulfilling the mitzvot is an act of revealing Hashem in this world.
2. By performing the mitzvot, we are binding or connecting ourselves to Hashem, which is the purpose of our life as Jews in this world.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁶ 'Fall' for our American readers.

⁷ I am not an expert in kabbalah. This is simply my very basic understanding of a very deep idea. (For any kabbalists out there who are reading this, please accept my apologies if this explanation is not accurate.)

⁸ A person's name reveals their essence. This of course cannot be true for Hashem Himself because it is simply not possible for humans to grasp Hashem's essence. However, Hashem's 'name' is the closest that we can get to interacting with His essence.

⁹ Heard from R' Dovid Tsap.