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Precious Stones of Unity and Individuality

Chassidus on the Parsha

"You shall place the Urim Vetumim within the Choshen."

According to Rashi, the Urim Vetumim was a Divine Name that was placed between the folds of the Choshen. According to the Rambam the Urim Vetumim were in the stones of the Choshen itself.

Through the Urim Vetumim, the leader of Bnei Yisroel would be able to inquire of Hashem about matters of national concern.

Our sages explain that the letters from the names of the Tribes would light up to spell out the answer from on High. The Kohen would need Divine insight to arrange the letters to decipher their meaning.

The word חשן (Choshen) shares the same letters as נחש (snake), the representation of evil and negativity in the world. Both words also share the same Gematria as משיח – Moshiach.

Golus was brought about by our sins, creating an apparent reality associated with the snake. The Geulah and Moshiach, represented in the form of a Gematria, is ever-present within the world, but hidden so that we do not see it.

The same is true in our personal moments of darkness as well. Whilst outwardly we experience darkness, latent within it is the light of opportunity and hidden blessing.

Like the Urim Vetumim, we need to decipher and decode our perceived reality to see its true nature

Whether we see נחש or חשן - the snake or the Divine Spirit - is in our control. If we open our eyes, with light and precision, we can see the reality of Moshiach and redemption, if we choose to interpret it for the good.

Parshas Tetzaveh records the details of how the garments of the Kohen Gadol and the other Kohanim were to be made. Two of these garments were adorned with precious stones, on which the names of the 12 Tribes were engraved.

On the Choshen (breastplate), the names of the 12 Tribes were inscribed on the 12 precious stones, arrayed in 4 rows of 3 stones. The Tribes were inscribed according to the order of their birth.

The other place where the names of the Tribes were engraved, was on the Avnei Shoham – the two onyx stones on the shoulder straps of the Ephod. Each stone bore the names of 6 Tribes. The sages of the Talmud have differing opinions on the order in which the Tribes were listed on these stones.

In the laws of the Temple Vessels, the Rambam describes and depicts the two Avnei Shoham. Initially it seems that the Rambam's opinion does not reflect any of the opinions in the Talmud. In order to reconcile the Rambam's view with the Gemara, the commentators explain that the Rambam viewed the Avnei Shoham as one single stone that is merely divided between the two shoulders. The order of names in the Talmud was written across the two stones as they are united.

So whereas on the Choshen each Tribe had their own individual stone, on the Avnei Shoham, all of the Tribes shared the same stone.

The reason that the names were etched into the stones of the Choshen was so that "Aharon will carry the names of Bnei Yisroel on the Choshen… over his heart, when he enters… before Hashem." Likewise, the wearing of the names on the Shoham stones of the Ephod is so that "Aharon will carry their names before Hashem on his two shoulders as a remembrance."

The difference in how the names appeared on the two garments, represents the different merits of the Jewish people that the Kohen Gadol would bring before Hashem.

On one hand, we each have our own individuality. These represent our own spiritual accomplishments and strengths. At the same time, we are all part of one people, suggesting a sense of equality. This is the merit of our unity.

Chassidus likens the different manner in which the names were inscribed on these two garments, to the difference between how the Torah passages are inserted into the Tefillin of the head and the Tefillin of the arm.

Both the Tefillin Shel Rosh and Tefillin Shel Yad, contain the same 4 passages from the Torah which record the Mitzvah of Tefillin.

In the head-Tefillin, these four passages are written on separate pieces of parchment and each passage is placed into their own compartment. This is like the Choshen, where each stone had only one name inscribed on it.

In the arm-Tefillin, the same four passages are written on a single scroll and placed into a single compartment. This is like the names on the Avnei Shoham, where all of the names of the Tribes are inscribed on the same stone.

The head and arm Tefillin also represent the idea of individuality and unity.

The head-Tefillin represents a service of Hashem based on our intellectual understanding and appreciation. The Choshen, which was worn over the heart, represents our Kavana, our emotions and feelings in the service Hashem.

In contrast, the arm-Tefillin represents action; the practical observance and 'doing' of the Mitzvos. This is also alluded to by the Shoham stones which were worn on the shoulders at the top of the arms.

When it comes to serving Hashem with our mind and heart, we are all different. Each person's level, depth and type of understanding will be different and some will have greater appreciation than others. Likewise, each person will have a different emotional experience and some will have greater feeling than others in their Avodah. This is why on the Choshen, each Tribe had its own unique stone.

But when it comes to the actual observance of a Mitzvah in deed, like the Avnei Shoham, we are all on the same stone. Whether a Mitzvah is fulfilled by a great scholar or mystic or an uninspired 'average-Joe'; whether one understands or appreciates the Mitzvah more, less or not at all, the Mitzvah and the connection achieved by it, is the same for everyone.

The Gemara teaches that there were 25 letters on each of the Avnei Shoham stones. These correspond to the 25 letters in the verse Shema Yisrael, where we pledge our absolute dedication to Hashem and readiness to sacrifice our lives for His sake. The 2 stones represent the two times we say the Shema each day; once in the morning and once in the night.

Just like the physical observance of Mitzvos is equal by every Jew, so is our Shema Yisrael. In the essence of our soul, every Jew is equally dedicated to and inseparable from Hashem Echad.

The Weekly Halacha Analysis

Magic Shows on Purim and Year-round

Rabbi Yonason Johnson

One of the prohibitions in the Torah is לא תעוננו[1]. In defining this issur and who is a מעונן (the practitioner), the Gemara[2] quotes the opinion of the Sages that this refers to one who creates illusions אוחז את העינים - literally one who holds the eyes. They relate the word מעונן to the word עין(eye).

Rashi explains that the מעונן holds people's eyes by making it appear that he has done something wondrous, when in fact he has done nothing. Rashi does not explain how these acts are performed to be subject to the issur.

Radbaz[3] suggests that such illusions could lead people to deny the miracles performed by Hashem ultimately corrupting the fundamentals of Jewish belief.

The Strict Approach

On the prohibition of לא תעוננו, the Rambam[4] brings the opinion of the sages that this (also) refers to one who creates illusions. He explains that this also includes tricks done by sleight-of-hand due to the swift movements of the performer. He gives examples of common tricks done by performers including those who puts a rope up their sleeve and pulls out a snake or someone who tosses a ring into the air and pulls it our of someone's mouth.

According to the Rambam this is Biblically forbidden as a form of כישוף - witchcraft. The performer also deceives people, which is forbidden as גניבת דעת.

Others who include tricks performed by sleight-of-hand as part of the Biblical issur of לא תעוננו include the Sefer Hachinuch[5], who writes almost identically to the Rambam.

The Lenient Approach

The Sefer Mitzvos Gadol[6] writes that אחיזת העינים is only forbidden when performed through actual sorcery to create the illusion of performing something impossible. Accordingly, the prohibition does not include tricks performed by sleight-of-hand.

This view, which stands in contrast to the Rambam and Sefer Hamitzvos quoted above, is also held by the Radbaz[7]. The Radbaz writes that it does not make sense that the Torah would prohibit (as a form of sorcery) tricks and illusions created simply by the swift hand motions. The Torah prohibition of אחיזת העינים refers to illusions done using impure forces.

The Later Authorities and Codifiers

The Bach[8] adopts the strict approach of the Rambam, including illusions created by sleight-of-hand in the Biblical prohibition.

The Ram"o[9] rules that אחיזת העינים is Biblically forbidden even when performed without involving witchcraft. It appears that the Ram"o also adopts the stringent approach[10].

The Shach[11] brings the stringent view of the Rambam as Halacha, citing the Ram"o and Bach who rule likewise.

Chochmas Odom[12] writes about Jewish badchanim (entertainers) who perform tricks at weddings to rejoice the Chosson and Kallah. He rules that it is categorically forbidden Min Hatorah. The one who hires or asks the performer to do these tricks transgresses לפני עור, the prohibition of placing a stumbling block before the blind, by causing them to sin. One who sees a Jew performing these tricks is obliged to protest and it is forbidden to participate by watching[13].

It is possible that even the Radbaz and Sefer Mitzvos Gadol who do not consider tricks by sleight-of-hand as being part of the Biblical issur, may concede that it is nonetheless Rabbinically forbidden[14].

Is There Room to be Lenient on Purim?

The Talmud[15] records a perplexing account where one Purim at the festive meal Rabbah slaughtered (and then revived) Rav Zeira. Meorei Or writes that Rabbah did not actually kill Rav Zeira. Rather the entire account was performed through אחיזת עינים which he explains was permitted as part of the Purim joy.

Can a Torah issur be permitted just because of Simchas Purim?

The Riv"o[16] writes that the bochurim who snatch from one another in the joy of Purim are not liable for theft[17]. R' Yehuda Mintz uses this ruling to justify the practice of dressing up on Purim in clothing of the opposite gender, despite the Biblical prohibition that is normally involved.

It could be argued that hosting illusionists or magic shows that employ sleight-of-hand tricks, should likewise be permissible for Simchas Purim.

Nonetheless many Poskim[18] rule that one may not dress up as the opposite gender even on Purim and the same would apply to magic shows. The case of the Riv"o is different because it is an issue of money (ממונות) which can be returned. One cannot extrapolate from this case to permit other prohibited behaviours (even if they are only Rabbinic) just on account of the joy of Purim.

Contemporary Authorities

Rav Ovadiah Yosef[19] rules like the stringent authorities. However he is lenient where the magician is a non-Jew. This is because many Poskim rule that a non-Jew is not commanded against witchcraft. We can rely on their view in light of the lenient opinion of the Radbaz who completely permits sleight-of-hand even for a Jewish performer.

Igros Moshe[20] references the stringent view of the Rambam, Bach and Shach who forbid sleight-of-hand. He questions that it does not seem logical to forbid someone using a natural talent such as great speed. He gives the example of the "super-natural" speed of Naftoli and the strength of Shimshon.

Rav Moshe takes a more lenient approach, permitting even a Jewish magician. Nonetheless the performer should announce that whatever he is doing is through natural mechanisms and sleight-of-hand. It is also advisable that they demonstrate the trick in such a way that everyone can see that it is sleight-of-hand. He may not pretend that he is doing super-natural things or say that he is doing magic.

In his conclusion, in deference to the stringent opinions, Rav Moshe writes that he would avoid ruling on the issue lemaaseh however if pressed he would rule as above.

For a practical halachic ruling for real-life Shaalos, please consult a competent halachic authority.

1. Vayikro 19:26
2. Sanhedrin 65b
3. Metzudos Dovid Mitzvah 61
4. Sefer Hamitzvos Lo Saaseh 32
5. Mitzvah 250
6. Lo Saaseh 53
7. Ibid
8. Yoreh Deah 189
9. Shaalos uTeshuvos simon 67
10. There is however significant discussion as to the Ram"o's actual intent in his wording. See Igros Moshe quoted below.
11. Y.D. 179:17
12. 89:6
13. Based on the Rambam (Hilchos Avodah Zarah 11:10) who rules that one who listens to the words of a Chover Chaver (another form of forbidden witchcraft) receives Rabbinic lashes for being a participant in this folly. The same would apply to other forms of witchcraft including the מעונן
14. Yabia Omer 5 Yoreh Deah 14 quoting Minchas Oni.
15. 7b
16. Rabbi Yitzchak ben Osher a Talmid of Rashi
17. The Ram"o brings a similar ruling in Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 695) that one is exempt from damage caused on account of Simchas Purim. He qualifies that it only applies to small financial amounts and only when genuinely in Simchas Purim without malicious intent.
18. See Ta"z Yoreh Deah 142 based on the Bach, that dressing in clothing of the opposite gender is forbidden on Purim and also forbidden even for Simchas Chosson Vekallah.
19. Yabia Omer 5 Yoreh Deah 14
20. Yoreh Deah 4:13