

This Week's Parshah - Parshas Va'eschanan

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of Yaffah *bas* Mordechai *a"h* a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Out of Bounds

The prohibitions of tampering with the *mitzvos* of the Torah in any way are outlined in this week's *parshah*. As the *passuk* says:

לֹא תִסְפוּ עַל הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם וְלֹא תִקְרְעוּ מִמֶּנּוּ...

“Do not add onto that which I have commanded you, and do not subtract from it” (*Devarim 4:2*).

One of the classic examples Rashi (*Ibid.*) utilizes to illustrate this idea is that of *tefillin*. Concerning *tefillin*, we find in the Mishnah in Menachos (4:7):

אַרְבַּע פְּרִשְׁיֹת שְׁבִתְפִלִּין מְעַכְבוֹת זו אֶת זו.

“There are four *parshiyos* (sections from the Torah) contained in the *tefillin*, whose number will invalidate.”

In other words, there must be precisely four *parshiyos* in the *tefillin*; any other number will render them invalid. If one is moved to place an extra *parshah* in them (i.e., five *parshiyos*), he violates the aforementioned prohibition of “Do not add (on to the mitzvah).” With only three, he will contravene the directive of “Do not subtract.”

Unlikely Neighbors

A noteworthy aspect of this command for precision is the Torah's choice of context. The following verse proceeds to discuss what appears to be a different matter entirely:

עֵינֵיכֶם הָרְאוּ אֹת אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה ה' בְּבַעַל פְּעוֹר כִּי כָל־הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר הִלֵּךְ אַחֲרָי בַּעַל פְּעוֹר הִשְׁמִידוּ ה' אֱלֹהֵיךָ מִקְרַבְךָ:

“Your eyes have seen that which Hashem has wrought concerning Ba'al Pe'or; for Hashem your G-d has blotted out anyone who had followed Ba'al Pe'or.”

The Ba'al Pe'or matter referred to by the *passuk* was an ugly stain on the Jewish people; in fact, the particulars of this type of idol worship are both bizarre and quite repulsive, actually. Which makes the juxtaposition of these two topics – *bal toseif* (the prohibition of adding a detail to a mitzvah) and Ba'al Pe'or (the episode of its idolatrous service) all the more curious.

At the behest of the wicked Bilam, the Moavite women enticed the Jews to engage in the worship of their deity. With the promise of further indulgences, they prompted the Jews to perform the idolatrous ritual associated with this pagan cult. This consisted of performing an act of defecation in the presence of the idol. How charming!

Needless to say, the Jews' participation in these pagan rites earned them Hashem's displeasure, and many subsequently had to pay for their indiscretion with their lives (*Bamidbar 25:1-9*).

What could possibly be the connection between these apparently disparate ideas? R' Chaim Shmuelevitz's beautiful exposition of the matter (*Sichos Mussar, parshas Pinchas*) sheds much light on the subject.

Attention to Detail

R' Chaim begins by taking a bit of a closer look at this strange ceremony. Even by pagan standards, the conduct of the Ba'al Pe'or worshippers seems to reach a new low.

In fact, the Gemara (*Sanhedrin 64a*) relates an event that reveals the depths of depravity to which this cult had sunk. A certain Jew by the name of Savtai took it upon himself to teach these "Pe'orites" a lesson. He approached the idol and performed the debased act, but – in an effort to heap the ultimate denigration on the idol – proceeded to tidy himself on Pe'or's nose! But, as he prepared to leave, he was shocked by the reaction of the attending priests. They actually were impressed and offered him praise. "We have never seen anyone perform the ceremony in such an outstanding manner before," they told him.

It seems, then, that the very essence of the service of this particular *avodah zarah* (form of idol worship) was actually to accord it as much disrespect as possible. In other words, the more one displayed contempt, the more exalted was its worship.

Obviously, our stomachs turn when we learn of the details of this bizarre cult. What could possibly fuel such unconventional behavior (to say the least)? R' Chaim points out that, in fact, the underlying notion of Pe'or worship is manifest in some way even today.

At the root of this whole institution is a desire to break down all barriers, to live a life totally unfettered by any concept of restraint. The Pe'or worshippers exemplified this trait by displaying just how far they were willing to go; they chose a path most people find inherently revolting and glorified these wanton acts.

Unfortunately, such an attitude should not appear totally foreign to us. Even in our society, those who seek to cast away even the most basic moral barriers trumpet their immoral tendencies in full view, in the form of massive parades and demonstrations.

Those of us who still adhere to a set of decent standards and desire to instill such values in our children often look on in wonderment: What happened here? How did the environment deteriorate so completely? From where did it all start?

This, then, is the lesson of our *parshah*. The Torah grants great importance to detail, as it reflects an adherence to boundaries and guidelines. When we are commanded in certain *mitzvos*, the expectation is to faithfully fulfill its particulars. "Do not add to them, and do not detract from them." If Hashem's Will is to place four sections in the *tefillin*, we dare not deviate from that amount with our own notions of "improvement."

For, as R' Chaim concludes, a field can be surrounded by a large stone fence on all sides; but once a breach appears – even a relatively small one, even in only one place – the fruits of the *entire* field now lie open to plunder.