



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

DISTRIBUTION DATE:

FRIDAY, APRIL 13TH 2018 – CHOF CHES ADAR 5778

PARSHAS SHMINI

SERMON TITLE:

Be a fish- do mitzvos!

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Shmini
Be a fish—do mitzvos!

Good Shabbos!

So there was a Chabad bochur, a young yeshivah student, standing in the suburbs of Los Angeles on a street corner next to tefillin stand. He was stopping every male passerby with the question, “Are you Jewish?” More than a few of them turned out to be Jewish, and they responded positively, agreeing to the suggestion of putting on tefillin.

On the opposite street corner stood a young hippy—and, given the neighborhood they were in, it was probable that he was Jewish, too. So when the young hippy came over to strike up a conversation, the Chabad student asked him the same question: “Are you Jewish?”

“Yes!” the young hippy gladly declared. “If so,” said the bochur, “you’re invited to put on tefillin.”

But the young hippy’s temper suddenly spiked without any prior warning. “How old are you?” he challenged the young Chabad student with a threatening expression. He didn’t even wait for an answer before going on. “It seems that I’m still older than you by a few years. How dare you ask me for my origins and tell me what to do? Do I look like I owe you something?! Where do you get your chutzpah?” the young hippy poured rage all over him and then stomped off.

“All I did was ask...” mumbled the student, downcast. But the young hippy had already left the immediate area, all the while loudly ranting about “those kids” who bothered him with strange questions.

But after he had calmed down a bit, the hippy started to think to himself and question the justice of his screaming and yelling. “Why did I get so angry?” he asked himself. “What did he want from me already? That I do a mitzvah?” And then pangs of regret and guilt attacked him: “Have I degenerated so badly that a reminder of a Jewish mitzvah ignites my rage so badly? No!”

So he decided right then and there that he had to learn about this mitzvah.

He then went to the nearest Judaica store, found out what tefillin is, bought himself a pair and started putting them on every day.

Days, then weeks, went by, and a few months later, he felt that he had to visit Israel. And like every American Jewish tourist, he made sure that his Israel visit included a visit to the Kotel HaMaaravi, the Western Wall.

Well, upon arriving at the Wall for the first time in his life, he beheld before his eyes the last remnant of our Holy Temple in all of its glory. The Kotel plaza, filled with people, caught his attention—but a familiar sight suddenly earned his notice.

It was the stand—yes, the stand—loaded with pairs of tefillin, next to which were standing a number of Jewish men putting them on. The memory hit him like lightning—the sight of the stand reminded him of that street corner in Los Angeles.

So our young hero now suddenly had another split-second decision. "I'm going to stay here," he decided, "and stand next to this stand to help Jews have the merit of the mitzvah of tefillin." And he did what he said. He made Jerusalem his place, and he went to the Kotel plaza every day, stood next to the Tefillin stand, and did his thing. For months, he could be found faithfully carrying out the Tefillin Campaign.

One blustery day at the end of Adar, 5747 (1987), he showed up as usual at the Tefillin stand. While he was still helping people put on Tefillin, he noticed an older woman standing off to the side and looking at him for a while. At first he didn't give it much thought. But as the minutes went by and the lady was still standing in her place and watching him, it started to make him wonder. He didn't understand why she would be so intent. Then, when the crowd of men thinned out a bit, the woman approached him and stood nearby.

"Which denomination do you belong to?" she asked. He was confused for a moment. He had never thought of associating himself with any Jewish denomination or movement. But the lady was now standing there and waiting for an answer. "I belong to Chabad," he finally said. He thought to himself that if he's standing at the stand at putting Tefillin on people, then he's acting like a Chabad shliach.

The lone woman acknowledged his response, expressed satisfaction with it, thanked him and went on his way.

A few days later, the phone rang in the offices of the Lubavitch Youth Organization in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. On the other side was a widow who lived in Flatbush and who was interested in donating books to a library.

So two yeshivah students were sent to visit her house. But upon arrival, they were shocked to discover a house filled with seforim, holy Jewish books. Every room in the house was lined with bookshelves brimming with seforim.

"I want to donate all these books to the Lubavitch library," explained the lady.

"But why do you want to donate them specifically to us?" the students asked. "How do you know Lubavitch at all in the first place?"

"Well, it's been going on ever since my husband passed away," she said. "He was a well-rounded scholar and lover of books. He collected many book throughout the course of his life, as you can see for yourself," she continued, pointing at the bookcases all around. "To tell you the truth, after he passed away, I didn't know what to do with all these books. I have no need for them!"

"Not long ago," she continued, "I visited Israel, and among other places, I also visited the Western Wall. It was there that I noticed the Tefillin stand. I saw how young men invite tourists to put on Tefillin. So I asked one of them standing there where he was from, and he told me that he was a Lubavitcher Chosid. Since I liked what they were doing, I decided right then and there to donate my late husband's books to Lubavitch. And indeed, as soon as I got back from Israel, I looked into it and found your library to be a suitable address."

So when those students looked into who it was that the woman had met at the Kotel Tefillin stand, it became clear that it was the same (former) hippy from Los Angeles! And that's the power of asking, "Are you Jewish?" (See Sichah, Vayakhel-Pikudei 5747.)

And that brings us to this week's Torah portion.

In this week's Parshah, we learn about the animals, birds and fish that we are allowed to eat. The Torah first gives us signs for the animals that are kosher to eat. Then the Torah tells us the following about fish: "This you shall eat from all that is in the water—all that has fins and scales in the water... they you shall eat" (Vayikra 11:9).

So the signs that a fish has to have in order to be considered kosher are "fins and scales." And the Talmud (Tractate Niddah 51a) adds, telling us that "every fish that has scales has fins, but there are those that have fins but don't have scales."

So a fish that has scales definitely also has fins—meaning that the scales themselves are proof that the fish in question is kosher to eat. But those fish that have only fins do not necessarily also have scales—and therefore, not necessarily are they kosher to eat.

So now we know which fish is kosher—and which fish restaurant we can go into.

But anyone who thinks for a minute understand that the commandments of the Torah are not just a book of instructions of what is allowed to be eaten and what isn't. It's clear that there is a much deeper moral message here.

And so Chasidic philosophy in general, and the Rebbe's teachings in particular, teach us how the entire Torah is one big lesson serving G-d—how each specific mitzvah or story relates to each one of us in every place and in every day and age. And that's also true with regards to the kosher symbols for fish.

The Rebbe frequently quoted the teaching of the Baal Shem Tov on the verse in Tehilim (107:23), "Those who go down to the sea in ships, who do work in mighty waters." The Baal Shem Tov taught that "those who go down to the sea" symbolizes the soul, which leaves Heaven to descend and dress itself in a body—in this physical universe symbolized by a stormy sea of mighty waters. In such a universe, one has to be careful not to drown in the "mighty waters" — which symbolize the burdens of livelihood and the obsession with materialism. But still, the Rebbe teaches (quoting Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs), the "mighty waters cannot extinguish the love..." which is hidden in the soul of every Jew" (Sichas Yud Shvat, 5725, Shabbos Parshahs Eikev, 20 Menachem Ave, 5747).

Additionally, the Talmud (Tractate Avodah Zarah 3b) mentions an analogy between people and fish in the sea. "Why are people compared to fish in the sea? To teach us that just as bigger fish in the sea eat up the smaller fish in the sea, so too is it with people—if not for the fear of government, anyone bigger than the next guy would swallow him."

The Rebbe's father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchok Schneersohn, of righteous memory, explains that within that analogy itself, you have "kosher fish" and "non-kosher fish"—and in the "sea" that is this physical universe, Jews are "kosher fish." Now, what are the signs of kosher fish? Fins and scales, of course. And Rabbi Levi Yitzchok explains that these two signs symbolize Torah and

mitzvos. The fins are the tools that give the fish the power to swim against the current of the water, while the scales are the clothing and armor of the fish.

So the Torah is symbolized by a fin—which, if you’ve ever gone diving, is what gives the person the power to swim against the stream. That means, to stand up against the world and believe in the right thing. Just like Avraham Avinu went against the entire world, which at the time all worshiped false gods while he was the only one who believed in the One True G-d. And just as fins are a part of the body of the fish, so too with the Jew is the Torah that he or she studies becomes a part of him or her.

But that’s not all. As mentioned, the scales of the fish symbolize the mitzvos.

Now mitzvos bond to the person, but only at the time the person is doing the mitzvah. For example, when you put on tefilin, you bond with the tefilin, with the mitzvah. But when you take the tefilin off, you’re separated from the mitzvah. When a person gives tzedakah, then his or her hand physically giving the money literally bonds with Divine energy. But once the money goes into the charity box, the hand is no longer part of the mitzvah. So it’s the same thing with the “scales”—as long as they’re attached to the “fish” (us), they’re part of the “fish,” but when the “fish” sheds them, the “fish” and the “scales” become two separate things.

So along comes the Talmud and teaches us that a fish that has fins doesn’t necessarily have scales, too. Meaning, someone who learns Torah isn’t necessarily a person who also keeps mitzvos. It’s possible to study the Torah and remain a self-centered person who only cares about himself. As the Talmud (Tractate Yevamos 109b) also says, “Anyone who says, ‘I have nothing but Torah, he has not even Torah.’” That means that there is a kind of person who says he’s only interested in Torah.

But on the other hand, a “fish” that has “scales” certainly has “fins”—meaning that the Jewish person who is busy with keeping actual mitzvos, whether they be the ritual mitzvos or the ethical mitzvos (like helping another Jew, etc.), is definitely associated one way or another with Torah study, too. Because in the merit of his keeping mitzvos, he will ultimately arrive at learning Torah, too.

When the Rebbe came out with the ten Mitzvah Campaigns, the emphasis was specifically on practical mitzvos like tefilin, mezuzah, tzedakah and so on. Because if a fish has scales, it definitely will have fins, too.