

What we can learn about D'varim 6: 6 – 9
An essay by Rav Ya'akov ben Yisrael

“... and you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes.”

These passages of scripture have always troubled me. I have always been one to see Yahweh's commands as simple to understand and not requiring any outward sign for confirming obedience. And yet, here in D'varim¹ chapter 6 verses 6 through 9 it appears that Yahweh has instructed us to do just that: wear “ornaments” on special areas of our body to show our obedience to His commands. I believe this requires a closer look. And to better understand what a particular scripture may mean we first have to know how the scripture of Torah is written.

The scripture of Torah is written in four levels of interpretation. Before continuing, an understanding of these levels is important. The literal or simple understanding is the P'shat (*pronounced peh-shaht' - meaning "simple"*) level. When one reads the words of scripture at this level of understanding everything said by the words can be taken at face value. The second level of scripture interpretation is the Remez (*pronounced reh-mez' - meaning "hint"*) level. At this level the words of the scripture “hint” or allude to another deeper meaning than face value. The P'shat meaning is still there also. D'rash (*pronounced deh-rahsh' also called "Midrash"*) is the third level of scripture interpretation. This is a teaching or exposition or application of the P'shat and/or Remez, such as an essay or sermon. There are three rules to consider when utilizing the d'rash interpretation of a text. These rules are shown in Appendix A. The fourth level of scripture interpretation is the Sod (*pronounced sawd or sood [like "wood"] - meaning "hidden"*) level. This understanding is the hidden, secret or perhaps mystic meaning of a text.

Our learned brother Yahudah, whom the world calls “the Jews”, has kept our Torah alive and in high reverence for the past 5770 plus years and is a logical reference for questions concerning the Torah. The Yahudim families have studied, interpreted, and taught Torah and the entire tanakh² to their children from birth on through adulthood, however, like ourselves even our brother Yahudah doesn't always make the correct interpretation. Yahudah has often taken the word of Yahweh at the P'shat level even though the underlying meaning is missed or over looked, sometimes in simple error, and sometimes for convenience. But let's not judge our brother. Let's focus on the verses and see for our selves what they say.

I have always felt that there was more to the words of D'varim chapter 6 verses 6 through 9 besides what the words themselves said. As I became more learned in Torah study and grew closer to Yahweh I have begun to view each passage of scripture using the four elements of interpretation mentioned above. However it wasn't until I began to translate each Hebrew word for myself that I began to see the deeper remez meaning. The first two thirds of these verses are quite easy to understand. We are to keep Yahweh's commands

and right rulings on our heart, teaching them to our children, speaking of them when at home, when we are out and about, at bedtime and when we awaken. But the remaining verses aren't as easy to understand. When I translated the words of the Torah to English I noticed that the word "as" in English when translated to Hebrew can mean "as, for, or like". When correctly translated for context as well as content the correct word is "for". At this point we have the following translation: and bind for sign/mark. It is easy to envision the commands of Yahweh as a binding on our hand, whether we use the leather strap that Yahudah uses or simply envision the commands as a covering on our hand. I applaud our brother Yahudah for selecting the left hand on which to wrap the leather binding. The left arm contains the blood vessel which is an almost direct line to our heart. So whether we bind a leather strap to remind us or simply envision the commands as a glove like covering, it is important for us to remember the commands of Yahweh.

Then I labored with the Hebrew word L'totofot. I knew from having taken Hebrew classes that the "L" prefix generally meant "to". So the translation eventually would mean "to" and something. The missing word could not be found in the Shilo Dictionary of Hebrew, The Vocabulary Guide to Biblical Hebrew³ or in the reference A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament⁴. And a word search on the Internet revealed nothing of promise or value for a definition.

When Yahweh enlightens His children to deeper meanings He often will use man as the medium of teaching. In the case of the understanding for the D'varim chapter 6 verses 8 through 9 and in particular the Hebrew word L'totofot, my understanding began to form after a Midrash with my Rabbi and close friend Rav Sh'ul ben Yisrael. Having a much better command of the Hebrew language than I, Rav Sh'ul explained the d'rash meaning for the word "l'totofot" was something like an encompassing band around the head at or just above eye level. And depending on context the band can be physical or a mental projection.

With this new understanding I quickly envisioned something of the nature of a banded crown around the head. Our brother Yahudah uses a small box containing Torah writings tied around their head to fulfill this command. In my mind I formed an image of the Torah of Yahweh as a crown around the head in an ethereal, swirling band, both reminding and protecting me. This basically filled the command to "let them be as frontlets between your eyes". However I still felt there was more to the command than making the Torah a visual crown, or fitting verses into a box and fastening above my eyes. It was at this point that Yahweh impressed on me the purpose for the command: to constantly remind us of our place before our Creator and our responsibility to obey His commands. The location of choice is the center of the frontal lobe of our brain area. This area is the part of the brain which we use for understanding, creativity, and control of the "life functions" of the body.

As we continue looking at the remaining verse we see Yahweh commanding us to write them on the door posts of our house and upon our gates. This is easy enough to understand. The common practice is to use a mazuzah⁵ to hold the scriptures.

And as we look in summary at the overall commandments in D'varim chapter 6, verses 6 through 9 we can now see that Yahweh wants us to hold His commandments as precious treasure in our hearts. Yahweh wants us to teach His commands diligently to our children, to talk about His commandments daily and at all times, remembering them at bedtime as we end our day, and when we awaken as we start our day. We are to have His commands on our hands so that everything we touch is touched by Yahweh's commandments and before our eyes so that everything we see or think of is filtered through the commands of Yahweh. Having His commands written on our gates and door posts ensures that we walk through and under His commands every time we go out or come in.

In following the simple commands of D'varim chapter 6 verses 6 through 9 we begin to live and walk in Yahweh's love, because only a loving Father would insert such a level of love and protection into our lives.

END

Notes

1. D'varim is Hebrew for Deuteronomy
2. The Tanakh is the compilation of the Torah, Prophets, Writings, and Psalms
3. Miles V. Van Pelt and Gary D. Practico, Zondervan 2003
4. William L. Holladay, Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1988
5. a mezuzah is a small oblong or rectangular box which is affixed to the door post or gate and contains the commands written on a small piece of kosher material

Appendix A

Reference website:

<http://www.yashanet.com/studies/judaism101/sidebars/pardes.htm>

P'shat (pronounced peh-shaht' - meaning "simple")

The p'shat is the plain, simple meaning of the text. The understanding of scripture in its natural, normal sense using the customary meanings of the word's being used, and context. The p'shat is the beginning of Scripture understanding. If we discard the p'shat we lose any real chance of an accurate understanding and we are no longer objectively deriving meaning from the Scriptures (exegesis), but subjectively reading meaning into the scriptures (eisogesis).

Remez (pronounced reh-mez' - meaning "hint")

This is where another (implied) meaning is alluded to in the text, usually revealing a deeper meaning. There may still be a p'shat meaning as well as another meaning as any verse can have multiple levels of meaning.

D'rash (pronounced deh-rahsh' also called "Midrash")

This is a teaching or exposition or application of the P'shat and/or Remez. (In some cases this could be considered comparable to a "sermon.")

There are three rules to consider when utilizing the d'rash interpretation of a text:

1. A d'rash interpretation can not be used to strip a passage of its p'shat meaning, nor may any such interpretation contradict the p'shat meaning of any other scripture passage.
2. Let scripture interpret scripture wherever possible. Look for the scriptures themselves to define the components of an allegory.
3. The primary components of an allegory represent specific realities. We should limit ourselves to these primary components when interpreting the text.

Sod (pronounced sawd or sood [like "wood"] - meaning "hidden")

This understanding is the hidden, secret or mystic meaning of a text.

Appendix B

The Transliteration and translation of the scripture D'varim Chapter 6, lines 8 and 9. (xxx) indicates no translation found.

Word 1: uk shar tom

(And, but, also, even, then) (to bind) (blameless, complete, perfect)

Word 2: l'ote

(to, toward, for) (sign, mark, pledge)

Word 3: ahl- ya deka

(yoke, on, upon, on account of, according to)

Word 4: va hi yu

(and, but, also, even, then) (xxx)

Word 5: l' tote ti fote

(to, toward, for) (encircling, encompassing, around)

Word 6: bayn

(between)

Word 7: ayn eka

(eyes) (of you, yours)

Word 8: uk tav tom

(and) (as, like, according to) (integrity, innocence, perfection)

Word 9: ahl – meh zu zote

(yoke, on, upon, on account of, according to) (xxx) (sign, mark, pledge)

Word 10: bayt eka

(house) (of you, yours)

Word 11: u vish a reka

(xxx) (gate) (xxx)