
TEFILLIN

Exploring the mitzvah of tefillin offers us a chance to appreciate one of the most profound positive commandments in the Torah. Tefillin are called an **אוֹת** (a sign) testifying to our mission as Jews and our eternal covenant with God. Tefillin serve to remind us of such fundamental concepts as God's Unity, His Providence, reward and punishment, and the Exodus from Egypt. But above all, tefillin are a symbol of the unique bond that exists between God and the Jewish people.

This class will examine why tefillin are so important. We will seek to answer some of the following questions:

- ☞ What are tefillin? What are inside the tefillin boxes?
- ☞ Why wear tefillin? What is the meaning of this mitzvah?
- ☞ Who wears tefillin and when? May women wear them?

Class Outline:

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INTRODUCTION

The Spy, from Silent Revolution, based on conversations with Rabbi Eliyahu Essas, ArtScroll/Mesorah Publications Ltd.

Things looked grim for Valentin. A student in Moscow University, he'd been caught attending classes in Judaism. Now he was in trouble. Retribution was swift, and soon Valentin found himself expelled from the university's hallowed halls and serving in the Russian army. Valentin was shipped out to a small Siberian town, far, far away from the Talmud classes, kosher food, and fellow Jews. All the mitzvot that he'd so recently taken on had become impossible to observe. Valentin determined to hold on to one thing, at the very least. Every morning, he told himself grimly, he would put on his tefillin. No matter what.

It wasn't easy to drag himself out of his bed on the frigid Siberian mornings. And yet Valentin managed to be up half an hour before reveille, don his tefillin, and pray to his Creator. One day, one of his fellow soldiers who had happened to waken early was astonished to see Valentin standing quietly in a corner, carefully winding straps around his arm, carefully placing a box upon his forehead. The next morning the soldier, his suspicions awakened, again awoke early, and again witnessed this mad – or possibly traitorous – behavior.

By the third day, the soldier had done his patriotic duty, and when Valentin roused himself from his all-too-short night's sleep, there were two officers on hand to witness these strange goings-on. The officers, both embittered remnants from Stalinist times, were not impressed with Valentin's protestations that the tefillin were religious objects. Prayer they could understand, although they didn't like it; but these straps? Clearly, Valentin was a spy, and the straps and box some sort of transmitting device.

Their first step was to confiscate the dangerous transmitter. Valentin, still protesting, insisted upon accompanying the tefillin to the lab where they would be examined. Curiously enough, the officers agreed, though insisting that a military guard escort him.

In the lab in a small Siberian town, the technicians had never seen such a device. The boxes, they surmised, served as transmitters, while the straps were antennas. As Valentin watched, horrified, they actually opened up the tefillin boxes. Gleefully, they pulled out the writing. A secret code! It is Hebrew, he protested. A language that has been dead for 2,000 years, they answered. A perfect code!

Getting more and more angry, and not a little scared, Valentin urged his captors to contact the small local Jewish community in the city of Novosibirsk to verify his words. Eventually the president of the synagogue heard about the hapless Jewish soldier and came forward to confirm his story. The officers were not eager to press charges of espionage. Instead, they told Valentin, he would be discharged on psychiatric grounds. "Because, if you're not a spy, you certainly must be crazy."

Instead of two years, Valentin finished his army service in two months, and soon was ready to rejoin his family and friends – Jewish friends – back in Moscow. Later, because he hadn't spent much time in the army, he was allowed to leave Russia and emigrate to Israel, without having to undergo the ordeal of being a refusenik. Valentin, now living in the Negev, knows where his "good luck" came from: his devotion to the mitzvah of tefillin.

SECTION I. OVERVIEW OF TEFILLIN

In the Torah, God bids us four times to wear tefillin. For example, “Place these words of Mine upon your heart and upon your soul ... Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be ornaments between your eyes.” These instructions are understood by Jewish tradition as referring to the mitzvah of wearing tefillin.

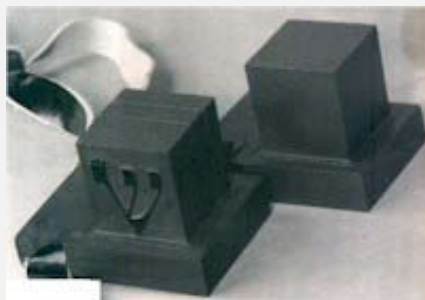
PART A. WHAT ARE TEFILLIN?

1. **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:4-9 – The first paragraph of the Shema is one of the four sources containing the mitzvah to wear tefillin on the arm and head.**

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These words which I am commanding you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you are at home, when traveling on the road, when you lie down, and when you get up. **Bind [these words] as a sign on your arm, and let them be ornaments between your eyes.** [Also] write them on [parchments affixed to] the doorposts of your houses and gates.

שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, ה' אֶחָד. וְאַהֲבַת, אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ. וְהָיוּ הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה, אֲשֶׁר אֲנוּכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם--עַל-לִבְּךָ. וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ, וְדַבַּרְתָּ בָם, בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִקְחֶךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכֶבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. וְקִשְׂרָתָם לְאוּר, עַל-יָדְךָ; וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפוֹת, בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ. וְכָתַבְתָּם עַל-מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ, וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ.

2. **Tefillin consist of two small black boxes made of leather.**



(Source: www.hasofer.com)

3. **What do tefillin contain and when are they worn?**

Each of these boxes, called *batim* in Hebrew, contains parchments inscribed with Biblical verses about the Exodus, the Oneness of God, and, of course, the mitzvah of tefillin. To perform this mitzvah one must strap these boxes onto the upper left arm opposite the heart (a lefty places it on his right arm) and onto the forehead between the eyes using black leather straps known as *retzu'ot* in Hebrew.

In ancient times tefillin were worn all day long. These days, for reasons that will be explored in Section IV, tefillin are only worn during the weekday morning prayer service, *Shacharit*, and not at all on Shabbat or Yom Tov. What may seem a quaint or even odd ritual is actually infused with deep meaning and symbolism, and is a practical tool for spiritual growth. One simply needs to keep in mind what tefillin are and what they represent.

We will discuss how tefillin are constructed and what they contain in Section III. First we will examine why tefillin are so important and meaningful.

PART B. BETROTHED TO GOD

1. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan, Tefillin – Tefillin serve as the physical reminder of God’s love for us and offer a tangible way to feel that bond.

Have you ever felt so close to another human being that every moment together was precious? Where every letter and memento from this person was something to be treasured? What if this person gave you a meaningful gift? Every time you looked at it or used it, would it not remind you of this special relationship?

To the best of our understanding, God’s very act of creation was an act of *chesed* (giving) and of love. It was a love so immense that the human mind cannot begin to fathom it. Tefillin are a sign of this bond between God and man. Faith and love are very tenuous things. We can speak of them and think about them. But unless we do something about them we tend to forget; tefillin serve to help us remember.

If you would open a pair of tefillin, you would find that they contain four parchments. One of these parchments consists of the famous Shema – “Listen Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.” Tefillin concretize for us that God created the universe, orchestrates world history, and is intimately involved with our daily lives.

The essence of the Torah is its commandments, *mitzvot* in Hebrew. The word *mitzvah* comes from the root meaning “to bind.” Every commandment or mitzvah serves to draw us close to God and strengthen this connection. With every mitzvah we forge a spiritual bond with God. In the case of tefillin, this bond is physical as well as spiritual. We literally bind God’s love symbol to our bodies. Thus, our Sages teach us that the commandment of tefillin encompasses all others. Here, we can actually see and feel the bond.

Just as a wedding ring serves to remind the bride of her husband’s love and commitment, the wearing of tefillin gives practical expression to the same ideals within the context of our relationship with God. This idea is illustrated by the way the tefillin strap is wrapped around the finger to create a symbolic wedding ring and the custom to recite the following verses while doing so:

2. Hoshea (Hosea) 2:21-22 – By reciting these verses we use the tefillin straps to symbolically betroth ourselves to God.

And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness, and with justice, and with loving-kindness, and with mercy. And I will betroth you to Me with faith, and you shall know the Lord.

וְאַרְשֵׁתִּיךָ לִי לְעוֹלָם; וְאַרְשֵׁתִּיךָ לִי בְצַדִּיק וּבְמִשְׁפָּט
וּבְחֶסֶד וּבְרַחֲמִים. וְאַרְשֵׁתִּיךָ לִי בְאֱמוּנָה; וְיָדַעַתְּ אֶת-יְ-
הוָה.

We will now explore how tefillin create this eternal bond, in what ways they ensure God’s kindness and mercy, and how they teach us the knowledge of God.

SECTION II. THE MEANING AND IMPORTANCE OF TEFILLIN

PART A: BINDING HEART AND SOUL

1. **Complete ArtScroll Siddur, pp. 6-7 – The customary statement of intent before donning tefillin reveals the meaning of the mitzvah.**

Behold, when I put on tefillin I intend to fulfill the commandment of my Creator, Who has commanded us to put on tefillin ... and to place them on the arm to recall the “outstretched arm” [of the Exodus] and that it be opposite the heart, thereby to subjugate the desires and the thoughts of our heart to His service, may His Name be blessed; and upon the head opposite the brain, so that the soul that is within my brain, together with my other senses and abilities, may all be subjugated to His service ...

הנני מכון בהנחת תפלין לקיים מצות בוראי שצונו להניח תפלין... וצונו להניח על היד לזכרון זרוע הנטויה ושהיא נגד הלב לשעבד בזה תאוות ומחשבות לבנו לעבודתו יתברך שמו, ועל הראש נגד המוח שהנשמה שבמחי עם שאר חושי וכחותיכלם יהיו משעבדים לעבודתו יתברך שמו...

2. **Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi, Sefer HaKuzari 3:11 – Tefillin focus our thoughts and feelings on the fundamental concepts contained within them.**

[A Jew] connects his mind with the Divine Influence through various means, some of which are mitzvot written in the Torah, while others are received tradition. He wears tefillin on his head, on the seat of thought and memory, the straps falling down on his hand so that he can see them at all times. He wears the hand tefillin on the source of his faculties, that is, the heart ... Inside the tefillin are written [verses describing God’s Unity, reward and punishment, and the remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt, because they furnish the irrefutable proof that the Divine Influence is attached to mankind, and that Providence watches them and keeps record of their deeds.

וקושר מצפוני בעניין האלוקי בתחבולות, מהם מצוות כתובות ומהם מקובלות, והוא נושא התפילין על מקום המחשבה והזיכרון מהראש, ואוצל מהם רצועה מגעת אל ידו, כדי שיראה אותה עם השעות, ותפילין של יד על מבוע הכוחות, רוצה לומר הלב... והכתוב בתפילין, הייחוד והגמול והעונש וזכר יציאת מצרים, מפני שהיא טענה שאין בה מדחה, כי לעניין האלוקי התחברות בברואים והשגחה עליהם וידעה במעשיהם.

Binding tefillin on the arm serves two symbolic purposes: (1) it recalls the “strong hand” and the “outstretched arm” that the Torah uses as metaphors for the display of God’s control over nature and His Providence over the Jewish people, respectively; (2) placed on the upper left arm, the tefillin sit close to the heart, thereby signifying the intent to focus one’s thoughts and desires on the fulfilment of God’s Will. The head tefillin sit opposite the brain to absorb the holiness of the Divine Influence into one’s intellect.

PART B. TEFILLIN IMPART HOLINESS AND AWE OF GOD

1. **Rambam (Maimonides), Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefillin u-Mezuzah 4:25 –26 Wearing tefillin affects how a person will behave.**

The holiness of tefillin is very great. The whole time that tefillin are on the head and the arm of a man he will be modest and God-fearing and will not be drawn after laughter and idle chatter. He will not think bad thoughts, but will turn his heart to words of truth and righteousness. Therefore, every man should try to wear tefillin all day, because this is the mitzvah. They said about Rav, the student of Rabbi HaKadosh (Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi), that his whole life he was never seen walking [even] four *amot* without Torah, tzitzit or tefillin ... And someone who wears tefillin regularly will have length of days, as it is written, "When the Lord is upon them they will live" (Yeshayahu/Isaiah 38:16).

קדושת תפילין, קדושה גדולה היא: שכל זמן שתפילין על ראשו של אדם, ועל זרועו – הוא עניו וירא, ואינו נמשך בשחוק ובשיחה בטילה, ואינו מהרהר במחשבות רעות, אלא מפנה ליבו לדברי האמת והצדק. לפיכך צריך אדם להשתדל להיותן עליו, כל היום--שמצותן, כך היא. אמרו עליו על רב תלמיד רבנו הקדוש, שכל ימיו לא ראוהו שהלך ארבע אמות בלא תורה, או בלא ציצית, או בלא תפילין... וכל הרגיל בתפילין – מאריך ימים, שנאמר "אדוניי, עליהם יחיו" (ישעיהו לח, טז).

2. **Talmud Bavli (Babylonian Talmud), Berachot 30b, cited by Maharitz Chayes in support of Rambam's claim about the effects of wearing tefillin.**

What is meant by, "Rejoice with trepidation" (Tehillim/Psalms 2:11)? Rav Adda bar Masna said in the name of Rabbah, "In the place where there is rejoicing there should also be trepidation." Abaye was sitting before Rabbah, who noticed that he was overly cheerful. Rabbah asked Abaye, "Doesn't the verse say 'Rejoice with trepidation?'" Abaye replied, "[Do not worry,] I am wearing tefillin."

מאי וגילו ברעדה? אמר רב אדא בר מתנא אמר רבה במקום גילה שם תהא רעדה. אביי הוה יתיב קמיה דרבה חזייה דהוה קא בדח טובא אמר וגילו ברעדה כתיב א"ל אנא תפילין מנחנא.

Tefillin is one of the three mitzvot in the Torah (Brit Milah, Shabbat, and tefillin) which are called an *אות* – a sign of our covenant with God.

3. **Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot, Positive Mitzvah #3 – Tefillin serve to remind us of our calling as Jews.**

This is what I explained to the exiles of Israel, to show to them that every individual is obligated in tefillin and mezuzah. I also explained to them that of the 613 mitzvot that Israel was commanded, there is no mitzvah that is considered a sign and testimony apart from three mitzvot: Brit Milah, Shabbat, and tefillin. Regarding each of them the Torah says they are a sign; and they truly are a sign and testimony to Israel that they are servants of God.

כך דרשתי פרשה זו בגליות ישראל להוכיח שכל אחד ואחד חייב בתפילין ומזוזה ועוד דרשתי להם כי מושג מאות ושלוש עשרי מצוות שנצטוו ישראל אין לך שום מצוה שתהא אות ועדות כי אם שלוש מצוות והם מילה ושבת ותפילין שנכתבו בשלשתן אות והם שלשתן אות ועדות לישראל שהם עבדים להקב"ה.

“On the basis of two witnesses a fact is established.” As such, each Jew is not fully Jewish unless he has two witnesses that he is Jewish. Therefore, on Shabbat and festivals (which are also called Shabbat), a man is exempt from wearing tefillin because Shabbat itself is called a sign. It is enough, then, that there are two witnesses that he is Jewish: the witnesses of Shabbat and Brit Milah. But during the week a person is obligated to wear tefillin in order that he should have two witnesses: the sign of tefillin and the sign of Brit Milah ...

I also explained to them that God desires that wicked people put on tefillin even more than the righteous, because the main reason that we were commanded in tefillin is so that we have something to remind the wicked and to set them on the honest and good path. They need the reminder and encouragement even more than those who grew up with the fear of Heaven all their lives ...

ועל פי שנים עדים יקום דבר, כל אחד מישראל אינו יהודי שלם אא"כ יש לו שני עדים שהוא יהודי. הלכך בשבת ויו"ט שנקרא שבת ושבת נקרא אות פטור אדם מלהניח תפילין כי די שיש לו שני עדים שהוא יהודי עדות שבת ועדות מילה אבל בחול חייב כל אדם להניח תפילין כדי שיהא לו שני עדים אות תפילין עם אות המילה ...

עוד זאת דרשתי להם כי יותר חפץ הקב"ה באדם רשע שינח תפילין מאדם צדיק ועיקר תפילין נצטוו להיות זכרון לרשעים ולישרם דרך טובה ויותר הם צריכים זכר וחיוזוק מאותם שגדלו ביראת שמים כל ימיהם והבאתי ראיה גדולה וחזק כי בתפילין יש ארבע פרשיות ובכל אחת כתוב ולטוטפת חוץ מאחת ששינה בה הכתוב וכתוב בה וזכרון ללמד שעיקר חיוב תפילין לאותם שצריכים יותר זכר

PART C. THE NAME *TEFILLIN* VS. *TOTAFOT*

While we refer to them as *tefillin*, the Biblical name for the same objects is *totafot*. Both names yield insight into the nature of the mitzvah and why they are worn.

1. Talmud Bavli, Menachot 34b – *Totafot* is an allusion to the number of compartments in the head tefillin.

It was taught: [The Torah mentions the word tefillin three times] *totafet* (in the singular, without a vav), *totafot* (in the singular, without a vav), *totafot* (in the plural with two vavs), makes a total of four [boxes in the head tefillin], says Rabbi Yishmael. Rabbi Akiva says, “You do not need that [derivation]. *Tot* in Katfian means two and *fot* in African means two.”

ת"ר לטטפת לטטפת לטוטפות הרי כאן ד' דברי רבי ישמעאל ר"ע אומר אינו צריך טט בכתפי שתים פת באפריקי שתים.

2. Rashi, Shemot (Exodus) 13:16 – *Totafot* means that they spark conversation about the Exodus.

“And totafot between your eyes” – this refers to tefillin. They are called *totafot* because there are four boxes. *Tot* in Katfian means two and *fot* in African means two.

Menachem explained that it is related to “And

ולטוטפת בין עיניך. תפילין ועל שם שהם ארבעה בתים קרוין טוטפות טט בכתפי שתים פת באפריקי שתים.

ומנחם חברו עם והטף אל דרום, אל תטיפו לשון

preach (*hatef*) toward the South” (Yechezkel/ Ezekiel 21:2) and, “Do not preach” (Michah/ Micah 2:6). In this sense it refers to speech, referring to the fact that tefillin are a “reminder between your eyes,” as it says in the first passage, and anyone who sees them bound between the eyes will remember the miracle [of the Exodus] and will speak about it.

דבור כמו ולזכרון בין עיניך האמורה בפרשה ראשונה שהרואה אותם קשורים בין העינים יזכור הנס וידבר בו.

3. **Mishnah, Shabbat 6:1 – The Mishnah uses the Biblical word to describe a type of women’s head ornament that would not be permissible to wear on Shabbat for technical reasons.**

What may a woman go out wearing [on the Shabbat] and what may she not go out wearing? She may not go out with ribbons of wool, ribbons of linen, or with straps around her head ... or with a *totefet* ...

במה אשה יוצאה ובמה אינה יוצאה לא תצא אשה לא בחוטי צמר ולא בחוטי פשתן ולא ברצועות שבראשה... ולא בטוטפת...

4. **Ramban (Nachmanides), Shemot 13:16 – Totafot are an ornament worn on the head, above the eyes.**

“And *totafot* between your eyes” – This word does not have a known linguistic origin ... However, our Sages call an article that is placed on the head a *totefet*, as they stated, “... nor with a *totefet*, nor with head bangles” (Mishnah, Shabbat 57a). And Rabbi Avahu said, “A *totefet* is an ornament that surrounds the head from ear to ear.” And since they were masters of the Hebrew language who spoke it and knew it well, it is fitting to accept their definition ...

The expression *between your eyes* teaches that the head tefillin are to be worn on the middle of the head and not to one side; or because the spot between the eyes is the root of the power of vision ... To emphasize the point that tefillin are to be above the eyes rather than between them, the Torah called them *totafot*, to be worn on the top of the head like an ornament.

ולטוטפות בין עיניך - אין למלה הזאת משפחה ידועה... אבל רבותינו יקראו הדבר המונח בראש “טוטפות” כמו שאמרו (שבת נו א) לא בטוטפת ולא בסנבוטין, ואמר רבי אבהו (שם ע"ב) אי זהו טוטפת המקפת מאזן לאזן, והם בעלי הלשון שמדברים בו ויודעים אותו ומהם ראוי לקבלו.

ולשון “בין עיניך”, שיהיו באמצעות הראש לא מצד אחד, או ששם שרשי העינים ומשם יהיה הראות. וכן ולא תשימו קרחה בין עיניכם למת, ולפרש זה חזר ואמר “ולטוטפות” לבאר שאין המצוה בין העינים למטה, אבל בגובה הראש מונחים שם כטוטפות.

5. **Rabbi Reuven Leuchter – The head tefillin reflect that we interact within a reality beyond our physical sensory experience.**

The general understanding of this is that there exists a level of perfection beyond that experienced by man, yet which is still pertinent to him. That is, man interacts within a reality beyond his physical sensory experience. This is the meaning of the head tefillin; it is a matter of holiness, of a world of perfection that is “above,” a world separate and distinct – as is the nature of holiness.

ההבנה הכללית בזה הוא, שיש שעור קומה שלם מעל למציאות האדם, שהאדם שייך אליו. דהיינו האדם נוגע בממדים מעבר למציאותו. וזה התפילין של ראש. וזה ענין הקדושה, שהוא עולם שלם 'מעל', דהיינו עולם 'מופרש ומובדל' כהגדרתה של קדושה.

This is what the Shulchan Aruch means when it says that the head tefillin lie “opposite the soul,” (similarly, Derech Hashem/The Way of God 1:5:2), that the soul comes from above and cannot be felt at all by the physical senses.

וזה גם מ"ש בשו"ע שהבאתי בהערה אחת, שתפילין של ראש הם נגד הנשמה, שעייין בדרך ה', שנשמה היא בא מלמעלה דווקא, היא לא מורגשת לאדם בחושיו כלל.

How did *totafot* become *tefillin*?

6. Siddur Otzar HaTefillot – The name tefillin signifies that we are separate from other nations, attached to God, and are a bulwark against assimilation.

I do not know with certainty when they began to call *totafot* by the name *tefillin* ... The first person to call them by that name was Shammai the Elder in the Mechilta (Parshat Bo, end of Ch. 17). “Shammai said these are the *tefillin* of my mother’s father...” But in the Talmud Yerushalmi it says that it was Hillel who said, “These are the *tefillin* of my mother’s father” (Eruvin 10:1). These Sages lived approximately one hundred years before the destruction of the Second Temple (70 C.E.) and it is reasonable to assume that this name had already been in use in the generations preceding them.

It seems that the name *tefillin* was created during the Babylonian exile from the root *tafel* which means connection or strong attachment ... Calling them by this name was a manner of giving a rationale for the mitzvah of *totafot*: that they serve as a sign to those who wear them that they are separate from all other nations and are *attached* to God ... The reason for this innovation during exile was in order to constantly remind the people of their obligations and servitude to their Father in Heaven and to remove any confusion of values and assimilation within the dominant culture.

והזמן אשר בו החלו הטוטפות להקרא בשם תפילין לא נודע לנו בבירור... הקדמון ביותר עתיק אשר הזכירם בשם תפילין הוא שמאי הזקן במכילתא בא סו"פ י"ז שמאי הזקן אומר אלו תפילין של בית אבי אמא... אבל בירושלמי עירובין פ"ה ה"א הגי' הלל הזקן אומר אלו של בית אבי אמא... הזקנים האלו היו בערך מאה שנה לפני החרבן וההשערה הישרה אומרת שבכר איזה דורות לפניהם החלו להקרא בשם הזה.

ונראה שהשם תפילין נתחדש בימי גלות בבל שרשו תפל שענינו חבור ודבוק חזק... וקריאת שם זה היא כעין נתינת טעם למצות הטוטפות כי אותם הם לנושאייהם שהם נבדלים מכל העמים ודבקים בהקב"ה... וטעם חדוש זה בגלות בכל כדי יהזכיר תמיד את העם חובתם ושעבודם לאביהם שבשמים לשמרם מן הטמיעה וההתבוללות בקרב אויביהם השליטים.

PART D. THE MANY MERITS OF WEARING TEFILLIN

Aside from the great religious and spiritual dimensions of tefillin, there are also many benefits that accrue one who performs this mitzvah.

1. Talmud Bavli, Menachot 44a – Wearing tefillin ensures long life.

He who wears tefillin is worthy of long life, as it is said, “They shall live, and before all of them the life of my spirit, and You cured me and gave me life” (Yeshayahu 38: 16).

כל המניח תפילין מאריך ימים, שנאמר: [ישעיהו ל"ח ה' עליהם יחיו ולכל בהן חיי רוחי ותחלימני והחיניני.

2. Siddur Beit Yaakov, p. 28 – Length of days, in this world and the next.

The mitzvah of tefillin is very great because someone who wears them will have length of days and will merit life in the World to Come. His sins are forgiven and *Gehinnom* will not have power over him. A voice issues forth to the angels who are appointed over the gates [saying]: “Give greatness to the duke of the King – this one who wore tefillin on his head and arm.”

גדולה מצות תפילין שהמניחן מאריך ימים והוא בן עוה"ב ועונותיו נמחלין ואין גיהנם שולט בו וקלא סליק למלאכין דממנן על דלותין רבו יקר לדוקנא דמלכא באיהו מאן דאנח תפילין ברישיה ודרועיה.

3. Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin 35a – Keeping the mitzvah of tefillin is like keeping all the mitzvot in the entire Torah.

“[These words] must be a sign on your arm and a reminder in the center of your head in order that God’s Torah will then be on your tongue.” [From here we see that] the mitzvah of tefillin is comparable to the entire Torah.

והיה לך לאות על ירך ולזכרון בין עיניך למען תהיה תורת ה' בפוך, הוקשה כל התורה כולה לתפילין

4. Ibid., 37b – Tefillin help merit a person to return to Israel.

Now that you have stated that any mitzvah incumbent on the individual must be observed whether in the Land of Israel or outside the Land ... why then does the Torah mention “coming into Israel” with regard to tefillin and [the mitzvah of redeeming] the first born donkey (since they are performed with the body they are obviously observed in all locations – Rashi)? As Rabbi Yishmael taught: Do these mitzvot in order that you [will merit] to enter the Land of Israel.

והשתא דאמרת: חובת הגוף נוהגת בין בא"י בין בח"ל... ביאה דכתב רחמנא גבי תפילין ופטור חמור למה לי (כיון דחובת הגוף היא פשיטא דנוהגת בכל מושבות—רש"י)? ההוא מיבעי ליה לכדתנא דבי ר' ישמעאל עשה מצוה זו שבשבילה תיכנס לארץ.

5. Talmud Bavli, Megillah 16b – Tefillin give honor to those that wear them.

“The Jews had light and joy, and gladness and honor” (Megillat Esther 8:16). “Honor” refers to tefillin, as the verse states, “All the nations of the world will see that the name of God is called upon you and they will be in awe of you” (Devarim 28:10).

ליהודים היתה אורה ושמחה וששון ויקר: ויקר אלו תפילין וכן הוא אומר (דברים כח) וראו כל עמי הארץ כי שם ה' נקרא עליך ויראו ממך.

6. Bamidbar Rabbah 12:3 – Divine protection.

It is written (Tehillim 91:7), “A thousand shall fall at your side ... it shall not come near you.” Through the mitzvah of tefillin one is guarded from evil by a thousand angels.

יפול מצדך וגו' רב יצחק אמר היד שהיא שולטת על מצוה אחת זו מצות תפילין כתיב בה יפול מצדך אלף שנמסר לה אלף מלאכים לשומרו

KEY THEMES OF SECTION II:

- ≈ Tefillin focus our thoughts and feelings on the fundamental concepts contained within them. The true meaning of tefillin only finds expression when they are strapped upon the arm and head. In those positions tefillin signify many profound theological concepts about God and our relationship with Him. Tefillin placed on the arm recall God’s mighty arm (i.e. His control over nature), and in that position they are also opposite the heart, reflecting our desire to perform His Will. Tefillin on the head express God’s exaltedness, while at the same time absorbing the holiness of the Divine Influence into one’s intellect. It also reflects that we interact within a reality beyond our physical sensory experience.
- ≈ Tefillin impart to one who wears them a sense of purpose as a Jew and inspire him with thoughts of holiness and fear of God. They are called a “sign,” as are circumcision and Shabbat, intrinsically testifying to our relationship with God.
- ≈ The name of the mitzvah, both in its Biblical origin of *totafot*, as well as in the later adaptation for the Diaspora “tefillin,” expresses the special bond between God and the Jewish people. Wearing tefillin maintains that connection. The name tefillin signifies that we are separate from other nations, attached to God, and are a bulwark against assimilation.
- ≈ Additionally, tefillin offer a wide range of fringe benefits including both long life in this world and the next, and Divine protection.

SECTION III. A LOOK AT THE TEFILLIN – INSIDE AND OUT



Source: www.ott.co.il/tefillin.html

In the familiar prayer of the Shema we read of the mitzvah to bind the very words of the Torah upon “your arm” and “between your eyes” (Devarim 6:8). The Mishnah tells us that this refers to four specific passages of the Torah, four *parshiyot*. These verses, once written in Hebrew script on parchment, are then placed in black leather boxes (*batim*) and bound upon the arm and head with black leather straps (*retzu’ot*). We refer to these items collectively as tefillin and the act of binding them as the mitzvah of wearing tefillin.

PART A. THE FOUR PARSHIYOT FROM THE TORAH

The command to wear tefillin is found four times in the Torah. These four Biblical passages thus form the content of both the arm and head tefillin boxes (cf. Talmud Bavli, Menachot 28a; Rashi ad loc.):

The first two passages deal with the Exodus from Egypt:

1. Shemot 13:1-10: Always remember the miracle of the Exodus from Egypt.

God spoke to Moshe (Moses), saying, “Sanctify to Me every first-born that initiates the womb among the Israelites. Among both man and beast, it is Mine.” Moshe said to the people, “Remember this day as [the time] you left Egypt, the place of slavery, when God brought you out of here with a show of force. No leaven may be eaten. Today you are leaving, in the month of springtime. There will come a time when God will bring you to the land of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Hivites and Jebusites, which He swore to your forefathers to give you, a land flowing with milk and honey, and you shall perform this service in this month. You shall eat matzot for seven days, and make the seventh day a festival to God.

“Matzot shall be eaten for [these] seven days; no leaven may be seen in your possession. No leaven may be seen in all your territories. On that day, you shall tell your son, ‘It is because of this that God acted for me when I left Egypt.’ [These words] shall also be a sign on your arm and a reminder between your eyes so that God’s Torah may be in your mouth. For it was with a show of strength that God brought you out of Egypt. You shall observe this decree at its designated time from year to year.”

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: קַדְּשׁ-לִי כָל-בְּכוֹר פֶּטֶר כָּל-
רְחֵם בְּבִנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאֲדָם וּבַבְּהֵמָה לִי הוּא: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה
אֶל-הָעָם זָכוֹר אֶת-הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה אֲשֶׁר יֵצְאתֶם מִמִּצְרַיִם
מִבֵּית עַבְדִּים כִּי בְּחֹזֶק יָד הוֹצִיא ה' אֶתְכֶם מִזֶּה וְלֹא
יֵאָכֵל חֶמֶץ: הַיּוֹם אַתֶּם יּוֹצְאִים בְּחֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב: וְהָיָה כִּי
יְבִיאֲכֶם ה' אֶל אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַחִזְיִי וְהַיְבוּסִי
אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר לְתַת לְךָ אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבַשׁ
וְעַבַדְתָּ אֶת הָעַבְדֹּה הַזֹּאת בְּחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה: שִׁבְעַת יָמִים
תֹּאכַל מַצּוֹת וּבַיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי חַג לַה':

מַצּוֹת יֵאָכֵל אֶת שִׁבְעַת הַיָּמִים וְלֹא יֵרָאֶה לְךָ חֶמֶץ וְלֹא
יֵרָאֶה לְךָ שְׂאוֹר בְּכָל-גְּבֻלְךָ: וְהַגְדַת לְבִנְךָ בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא
לֵאמֹר בַּעֲבוּר זֶה עָשָׂה ה' לִי בְּצֵאתִי מִמִּצְרַיִם: וְהָיָה לְךָ
לְאוֹת עַל יָדְךָ וּלְזִכְרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה תּוֹרַת ה'
בְּפִיךָ כִּי בְיַד חֲזָקָה הוֹצִיאֲכֶם ה' מִמִּצְרַיִם: וְשִׁמְרַתְּ אֶת-
הַחֻקָּה הַזֹּאת לְמוֹעֵדָה מִיָּמִים יְמִימָה:

2. Ibid. 13:11-16 – Recall the plague of the death of the first-born and the associated mitzvah to sanctify all Jewish firstborns.

“There will come a time when God will have brought you to the land of the Canaanites, which He promised you and your ancestors, and He will have given it to you. You will then bring to God every [first-born] that initiates the womb. Whenever you have a young firstling animal, the males belong to God. Every firstling donkey must be redeemed with a sheep. If it is not redeemed, you must decapitate it.

וְהָיָה כִּי-יְבִאֲכֶם ה', אֶל-אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי, בְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְךָ,
וְלְאַבְרָהָם; וּנְתַנָּהּ, לְךָ. וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ כָּל-פֶּטֶר-רְחֵם, לַיהוָה;
וְכָל-פֶּטֶר שֹׁגֵר בְּהֵמָה, אֲשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לְךָ הַזְּכָרִים--לַיהוָה.
וְכָל-פֶּטֶר חֲמוֹר תִּפְדֶּה בְּשֵׂה, וְאִם-לֹא תִפְדֶּה וְעֲרַפְתָּו;

“You shall [also] redeem every first-born among your sons. Your child may later ask you, ‘What is this?’ You shall answer him, ‘With a show of power, God brought us out of Egypt, the place of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us leave, God killed all the first-born in Egypt, man and beast alike. I therefore sacrifice to God all male firstling [animals], and redeem all the first-born of my sons.’

“[These words] shall [also] be a sign on your arm and an ornament between your eyes, for with a strong hand God brought us out of Egypt.”

וכל בכור אדם בבניך, תפדה. והיה כי-ישאלך בנוך,
מחר--לאמר מה-זאת: ואמרת אליו--בחזק יד
הוציאנו ה' ממצרים, מבית עבדים. ויהי, כי-הקשה
פרעה לשלחנו, ויחרוג ה' כל-בכור בארץ מצרים,
מבכור אדם ועד-בכור בהמה; על-כן אני זוכה ליהוה,
כל-פטר רחם הזכרים, וכל-בכור בני, אפדה.

והיה לאות על-ידך, ולטוטפת בין עיניך: כי בחזק יד,
הוציאנו ה' ממצרים.

Remembering the Exodus is a central theme in Judaism, one not limited to the Passover Seder. In fact, it is a mitzvah to remember the Exodus at least once each day and night. When God revealed Himself to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai, He introduced Himself as “your God who took you out of the Land of Egypt.”

The reason why the Exodus is so important in Judaism is because the lessons it taught us form the bedrock of our belief. God did not just create the world and then set it on auto-pilot. He is actively involved in the affairs of man and our relationship with Him will determine the course of our fate. And this specifically applies to the Jewish people, whose very birth as a nation was a direct result of Divine intervention into the politics of nations and the laws of nature. We owe our lives to God just for His having created the world, but after the Exodus we owe him our gratitude for giving us our freedom as well. Hence, the Exodus forms the basis of our knowledge, as well as our relationship with God.

The second two verses are from the Shema:

3. Devarim 6:4-9 – Love God and make the words of His Torah a constant fixture in your life.

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, must remain on your heart. You shall teach them to your children and speak of them when you are at home, when traveling on the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind [these words] as a sign on your hand, and let them be an ornament between your eyes. [Also] write them on [parchments affixed to] the doorposts of your houses and gates.

שמע, ישראל: ה' אלוהינו, ה' אחד. ואהבת, את ה'
אלוהיך, בכל-לבבך ובכל-נפשך, ובכל-מאודך. והיו
הדברים האלה, אשר אנכי מצוונך היום--על-לבבך.
ושונתם לבניך, ודברת בם, בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך
בדרך, ובשכבך ובקומך. וקשרתם לאות, על-ידך;
והיו לטוטפות, בין עיניך. וכתבתם על-מזוזות ביתך,
ובשעריך.

The Torah here speaks of three kinds of love: heart, soul, and might. Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan explains that tefillin mirror these three kinds of love. They are placed next to the heart and also on the head, the seat of the soul. Additionally, they are wrapped around the arm, a symbol of strength.

Rabbi Noach Orlowek defines love as: “What’s important to you is important to me.” We show our love of God by how we live for Him and, if need be, die for Him. We also show it in how we treat His Torah, the expression of His Will in this world. Showing our appreciation of the Torah through study and mitzvah observance is a demonstration of our love for God: What’s important to Him is important to us!

4. **Devarim 11:13-21 – Be careful not to desecrate the Torah as there is reward and punishment for our actions.**

If you are careful to pay heed to my commandments, which I am prescribing to you today, and if you love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, [then God has made this promise]: I will grant the fall and spring rains in your land at their proper time, so that you will have an ample harvest of grain, oil, and wine. I will grant forage in your fields for your animals, and you will eat and be satisfied. Be careful that your heart not be tempted to go astray and worship other gods, bowing down to them. God’s anger will then be directed against you, and He will lock up the skies so that there will not be any rain. The land will not give forth its crops, and you will rapidly vanish from the good land that God is giving you. Place these words of mine on your heart and soul.

Bind them as a sign on your arm, and let them be an ornament between your eyes. Teach your children to speak of them when you are at home, when traveling on the road, when you lie down, and when you get up. [Also] write them on [parchments affixed to] the doorposts of your houses and gates. [If you do this,] you and your children will long endure on the land that God swore to your ancestors, [promising that] He would give it to them as long as the heavens are above the earth.

וְהָיָה, אִם-שָׁמוּעַ תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹתַי, אֲשֶׁר אֲנוֹכִי מֵצַוֶּה אֹתְכֶם, הַיּוֹם--לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, וּלְעִבְדוֹ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם, וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם. וְנָתַתִּי מִטֶּר-אֶרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ, יוֹרֵה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ; וְאִסַּפְתִּי דִגְנְךָ, וְתִירוֹשְׁךָ וְיִצְהָרְךָ. וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב בְּשִׂדְךָ, לְבַהֲמוֹתֶיךָ; וְאִכְלָתָּ, וְשָׂבַעְתָּ. הִשְׁמָרוּ לָכֶם, פֶּן יִפְתָּה לְבַבְכֶם; וְסָרְתֶם, וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים, וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם, לָהֶם. וְחָרָה אַף-ה' בְּכֶם, וְעָצַר אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וּלֹא-יִהְיֶה מִטֶּר, וְהִאֲדָמָה, לֹא תִתֵּן אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ; וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מִהָרָה, מִזֶּעַל הָאֲרֶז הַטֹּבָה, אֲשֶׁר ה', נֹתֵן לָכֶם.

וְשִׂמְתֶם אֶת-דְּבָרֵי אֱלֹהִים, עַל-לִבְבְּכֶם וְעַל-נַפְשְׁכֶם; וְקִשְׂרֹתֶם אוֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֵיכֶם, וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם. וְלִמְדוֹתֶם אוֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם, לְדַבֵּר בָּם, בְּשִׁבְתְּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלִקְחֶךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ, וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. וְקִתְבֹתָם עַל-מְזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ, וּבְשַׁעֲרֶיךָ. לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם, וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם, עַל הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע ה' לְאַבְרָהָם לְתַת לָהֶם--בְּיָמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם, עַל-הָאֲרֶז.

Rambam counts among the thirteen fundamentals of Jewish faith the principle that God is aware of our actions and that He reacts to them. But reward and punishment is not programmed into nature; it exists within the context of a relationship with a personal God. He is not indifferent to our choices: He cares that we make the right ones. And awareness of this reality invests all our actions with meaning and a sense of purpose.

Ultimately, one may summarize the content and meaning of these four passages as follows:

5. **Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, Horeb p. 176 – Summary of the four *parshiyot*.**

1. It is God Who delivered you from Egypt and therefore you and every member of your family and all of your possessions are sanctified to God, i.e. they are elected for special service to Him.
2. You have kept your life from becoming extinct only through taking this service upon yourself.

3. This mission which you have undertaken is to be fulfilled by taking God to heart as your own God, as your only God, and by surrendering with love all that is yours, inwardly and outwardly, in His service as enjoined by the Torah.
4. The external fortunes of the people, whether prosperity or affliction ... are granted by God only in the measure of your fulfilment of His Torah.

PART B. HOUSES/BOXES (BATIM) AND STRAPS (RETZU'OT)

The four *parshiyot* of both the arm and the head tefillin are contained within black leather boxes called *batim* which are then wrapped onto the body with black leather straps called *retzu'ot*. The Torah does not tell us this explicitly. Rather, the source of these laws is an oral tradition dating back to Moshe himself – a special category of Jewish Law known as *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai* (a tradition of Moshe from Sinai).

1. Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 28b – By process of elimination, we learn that many details of tefillin are known only through oral tradition.

That which Rav Yosef taught – that for “the work of heaven” only skins of kosher animals may be used – to what does it apply? [It applies] to tefillin. But surely that was already taught by the Torah itself when it wrote, “In order that this Torah of God should be in your mouth,” implying only things which are kosher for your mouth. Rather, it refers to the outside of the tefillin. But didn't Abaye say that the *shin* [on the outside of tefillin] is a *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai* [and therefore no verse in the Torah is needed to teach this law]?

Rather, it refers to the fact that the *parshiyot* must be wrapped with the hair [of a kosher animal] and [that they must be sewn with] sinews [of a kosher animal]. But surely this is also *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai* as it was taught, “Tefillin must be square, based on *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai* and must be wrapped with hair and sewn with sinews.” Rather, it refers to the straps. But didn't Rabbi Yitzchak say, “The straps must be black, as derived from *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai*?” It is true that we learned [by tradition] that they must be black, but we did not learn that they must be from a kosher animal!

ואלא הא דתני רב יוסף לא הוכשרו במלאכת שמים
אלא עור בהמה טהורה בלבד למאי הלכתא לתפילין
תפילין בהדיא כתיב בהו (שמות יג) למען תהיה תורת
ה' בפיך מן המותר בפיך אלא לעורן והאמר אביי שי"ן
של תפילין הל"מ

אלא לכורכן בשערן ולתופרן בגידן הא נמי הל"מ הוא
דתניא תפילין מרובעות הל"מ נכרכו בשערן ונתפרות
בגידן אלא לרצועו' והא"ר יצחק רצועות שחורות
הל"מ נהי דגמירי שחורות טהורות מי גמירי.

What are the Differences between Head and Arm Tefillin?

While both the head and arm tefillin stem from the same source in *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai* and contain the same *parshiyot*, nevertheless there are some significant differences in their structure:

2. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 32:2; Mishnah Berurah ad loc. – Differences in physical structure reflect the Torah's wording.

For the head tefillin one should write each portion on a separate scroll, and for the arm tefillin one should write all [four] of them on one scroll.

This is because it says, “And they shall be for a sign on your arm” [in the singular form] meaning one sign, one compartment; and just like it must be only one sign on the outside, so too it should ideally only be one sign on the inside, written on one scroll.

Mishnah Berurah:

But for the head tefillin, which consists of four separate compartments [as the plural form “ornaments” is used for it], the passages should be written on four separate scrolls.

של ראש יכתוב כל אחת בקלף לבדה, ושל יד כותבן כולם בקלף אחד.

בקלף אחד - מדכתיב והיה לאות על ירך דמשמע אות אחד כלומר בית אחד וכשם שהוא אות אחד מבחוץ כך יש להיות לכתחלה אות א' מבפנים שתהיה על קלף אחד.

אבל בש"ר שיש בו ד' בתים צריך שיהי הפרשיות כתובות בד' קלפים.

The arm tefillin is a singular “sign” and therefore its *parshiyot* are all written on one parchment and placed in a box with one compartment. The head tefillin, referred to in the Torah by the plural word “ornaments,” contains four compartments and has its *parshiyot* written on four separate parchments. In fact, a close look at the head tefillin reveals that it is actually constructed of four compartments tightly pressed together (see picture above at the beginning of Section III).

Putting it all Together: Sha-dai, the Name of God

When we look at the boxes and straps together, a unique picture emerges:

3. Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot, Mitzvah #22 – The oral tradition teaches us to form the tefillin in a way that spells the name of God.

When [the Talmud] says that the knot of the tefillin is *Halachah l'Moshe MiSinai* it refers to the name of God, as it is said that there is a *shin* in the mold on each side of the head tefillin, a *dalet* in the knot of the head tefillin, and a *yud* in the knot of the arm tefillin where the straps pass through. In this way the name of God “*Sha-dai*” is formed.

קשר של תפילין הלכה למושה מסיני היינו השם שרגלים לומר שיש שי"ן בקמט הדפוס לכאן ולכאן ואות דלית בקשר של ראש ובקשר של יד עוברת מעט הרצועה ונראית כמין יו"ד ובכך נעשה השם של שד-י.

PART C. COLORS AND SHAPES

Tefillin are striking in their unique look: jet black boxes, perfectly squared. That is how they must be and how they always have been. Even these seemingly aesthetic elements of tefillin relay profound insights.

1. **Rabbi Mordechai Becher, Gateways to Judaism, p. 324, citing Yaffe Lelev 25:33**

The sensation of blackness is due to a lack of stimulation of the retina. This occurs because little or no light is reflected from a black surface. The smooth, featureless, black surface of the tefillin thus suggests the unique and indivisible Oneness of God, which is not reflected in anything else and to which nothing can be compared.

2. **Samson Raphael Hirsch, Collected Writings, Vol. III, p. 152 – The square shape of tefillin reflect the intelligent mark of human free will.**

We note that the square was the predominant shape in the construction of the Temple and its accessories ... We therefore maintain that the circle characterizes the structures produced by organic forces not endowed with free will, while angles and squares are the hallmark of man, who can use his intelligence and free will in building his creations and structures. We may thus understand why the circular form was not used in the makeup of any sacred structure or object in Judaism. We will then understand, too, why the same rule was applied to the shape of tefillin: The tefillin represent, in miniature, the abode we must prepare on earth for the Law of God. This kind of structure is expected of man because he is a human being endowed with the Divine freedom, not a creature restricted in its development by the forces of nature. The circle is associated with constraint and lack of freedom; the square is the mark of human freedom which masters the material world.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION III

∞ The Biblical commandment to bind the words of the Torah upon ourselves comes to fruition in the mitzvah of donning tefillin. The specific words that we place upon ourselves when we wear tefillin are those very verses that mention this mitzvah. These four passages express God's Providence over our history and our destiny, and our mission to serve Him through the study and fulfillment of His Torah. Besides for the *parshiyot* found in the Torah, Jewish tradition teaches that tefillin are formed from leather and shaped into black boxes and straps. The form these items take once strapped upon the body reveals one of the sacred secrets of this mitzvah, while their color and shape reflect their essential message.

SECTION IV: WHO WEARS TEFILLIN AND WHEN?

The mitzvah of donning tefillin requires one to wear them all day long. However, the high level of sanctity demanded by tefillin precludes most people's ability to fulfill the mitzvah in this way. A compromise is therefore suggested:

PART A. ALL DAY LONG?

1. **Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 37:2 – The very sanctity of tefillin precludes keeping the mitzvah all day long.**

The mitzvah is to wear tefillin all day long. However, tefillin require a clean body (to the point that a person may not even pass wind while wearing them) and that one not take his mind

מצותן להיותם עליו כל היום אבל מפני שצריכים גוף נקי שלא יפיח בהם ושלא יסיח דעתו מהם ואין כל אדם יכול לזוהר בהם נהגו שלא להניחם כל היום ומ"מ

off them. And since not every person is able to be meticulous about this, therefore the custom is not to wear them all day. However, a person must be meticulous about wearing them when he is saying Shema and praying the *Amidah*.

צריך כל אדם לזהר בהם להיותם עליו בשעת ק"ש ותפלה.

2. Vilna Gaon, Kesser Rosh 15 – Nevertheless, the ideal remains intact.

[Rav Chaim of Volozhin] said in the name of his teacher, the Vilna Gaon, that he was very troubled that this generation was not keeping the mitzvah of tefillin properly, which is to wear it all day. It is known that the author of the *Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot* went around the world to warn all Jews that they should wear a four-cornered garment with tzitzit at all times. Similarly, if he [the Vilna Gaon] would have had the energy, he would have gone around the world to return the crown to its former glory [and encourage] Jews to wear tefillin all day long.

אמר בשם רבו הגר"א ז"ל שהצטער הרבה על הדור הזה שמבטלין עיקר המצוה דתפילין שמצותה כל היום, כידוע שבעל הסמ"ג היה מסבב העולם להזהיר לכל ישראל שילבשו בגד בת ד' כנפות עם ציצית כך אילו היה בכוחותיו היה סובב את העולם להחזיר עטרה ליושנה שיניחו ישראל תפילין כל היום.

As we learned above (Section II.B, Source 3), tefillin is one of the three mitzvot in the Torah (Brit Milah, Shabbat, and tefillin) which are called an **אות** – a sign of our covenant with God. Two "signs" must always be seen. On Shabbat, which is itself a "sign", the tefillin are not worn.

3. Talmud Bavli, Menachot 36b – Shabbat supersedes tefillin as a sign of being Jewish.

Rabbi Akiva said, "Perhaps you would say that a person should don tefillin on Shabbat and Yom Tov? Learn otherwise from that which is written, 'And it shall be as a sign upon your arm and ornaments between your eyes' (Shemot 13). He who needs a sign [must wear tefillin], excluding Shabbat and Yom Tov, which in their own right are signs." (Rashi – Between God and Israel, as it is written, "For it is an eternal sign" (Shemot 31).)

ר' עקיבא אומר: יכול יניח אדם תפילין בשבתות ובימים טובים? ת"ל: (שמות י"ג) והיה לאות על ירך ולטוטפת בין עיניך, מי שצריכין אות, יצאו שבתות וימים טובים שהן גופן אות (רש"י: בין הקב"ה לישראל דכתיב (שמות לא) כי אות היא וגו').

PART B: WOMEN AND TEFILLIN

As with any time-bound positive mitzvah, women are exempt from the obligation to wear tefillin. This exemption, though, is not a prohibition and does not preempt the performance of this mitzvah by women, should they choose to do so. The question is whether such a practice is to be encouraged or not.

1. Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah #421

This mitzvah applies at all times and in all places for men, but not for women because it is a time

ונוהגת מצוה זו בכל מקום ובכל זמן בזכרים אבל לא בנקבות לפי שהיא מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא. ומכל

-bound positive mitzvah. However, if [women] want to put on tefillin, we do not object and they receive spiritual reward.

מקום אם רצו להניח אין ממוחין בידם ושכר יש להן.

The Curious Case of Michal bat Kushi: Exception or the Rule?

Michal was the daughter of King Shaul (Saul), referred to here as Kushi as a title of distinction (cf. Tehillim 7:1), and the wife of King David.

2. Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 96a

It was taught: Michal bat Kushi wore tefillin and the Sages did not object.

תניא מיכל בת כושי היתה מנחת תפילין ולא מיחו בה חכמים.

Michal was childless and may have wished to partake of the special merits of tefillin as a means of increasing her spiritual standing (cf. Ben Yehoyada ad loc.). The case is taken as landmark by many authorities that women are not to be discouraged from wearing tefillin. Nevertheless, the prevalent custom has been that women do not don tefillin. Such is enshrined in the Code of Jewish Law:

3. Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 38:3 – The normative halachah is that women should not wear tefillin.

Women ... are exempt from tefillin because it is a positive time-bound mitzvah.

Rema:

And even if women want to be strict with themselves [and put on tefillin], we object to this practice.

נשים... פטורים מתפילין מפני שהוא מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא:

הג"ה ואם הנשים רוצין להחמיר על עצמן מוחין בידם.

The objection to women wearing tefillin may also have roots in the case of Michal bat Kushi:

4. Talmud Yerushalmi, Berachot 2:3(p. 14b), and Pesikta Rabati 22 – A different account of the reaction to Michal reveals the basis for a dissenting view.

Behold! Michal bat Kushi wore tefillin and the wife of Yonah (Jonah) the prophet used to ascend to Jerusalem for the Pilgrimage Festivals and in neither case did the Sages object. Rabbi Chizkiyah said in the name of Rabbi Abahu, "The wife of Yonah was sent back and the Sages did object to the practice of Michal bat Kushi!"

הרי מיכל בת כושי היתה לובשת תפילין ואשתו של יונה היתה עולה לרגלים ולא מיחו בידיה חכמים ר' חזקיה בשם ר' אבהו אשתו של יונה הושבה מיכל בת כושי מיחו בידיה חכמים.

Women's exemption alone would not necessarily be grounds for objecting to isolated incidences of them wearing tefillin. Women are in fact usually encouraged to perform even those mitzvot from which they are exempt, such as lulav and sukkah. The optional wearing of tefillin, though, is different. We offer two explanations:

Rationale for Objection #1: Tefillin are too Holy

5. Moshe Meiselman, *Jewish Women in Jewish Law*, pp. 148-149 – The sanctity of tefillin restrict when and by whom they may be worn.

[A]lthough the basic mitzvah of tefillin is that they be worn all day, only people of unusual sanctity, like the Vilna Gaon, did in fact do so ... Men wear them, generally, only during prayer, the minimal period of time required. Similarly, although we begin training children to perform mitzvot far in advance of maturity, tefillin are not worn until shortly before Bar Mitzvah. The optional wearing of tefillin is to be avoided! Those who are obligated cannot be prevented from performing [the mitzvah of tefillin], but the rabbis [in the Talmud] debated the propriety of [its] performance by anyone on an optional basis, weighing the positive results against the possible negative results. The debate in the Talmud on whether women may wear tefillin is concerned with this very point.

Women are discouraged from optionally wearing tefillin, just as men are discouraged from wearing them any longer than necessary. Hence, the consensus opinion in Jewish law is that the very sanctity of tefillin demand that they be worn on an as-needed basis only. For this reason, the Shulchan Aruch, the code of Jewish Law, and every halachic authority since, has ruled that women are not to wear tefillin.

Another rationale is offered for why the Sages at the time objected to Michal's wearing tefillin and why it would be objected to these days as well. (What follows is more of a Kabbalistic perspective than a halachic one.)

Rationale for Objection #2: Men's Clothing

6. Devarim 22:5 – The prohibition of cross-dressing.

Women should not wear the garment of a man.

לא-יִהְיֶה כְּלִי-גֵבֶר עַל-אִשָּׁה.

While simply speaking this prohibition would not apply to tefillin, which do not have the status of clothing, nevertheless some authorities have made the connection.

7. Rabbi Yonatan ben Uziel, *Targum Yonatan*, (1st Century BCE), Devarim 22:5 – Tefillin are specifically designed for the spiritual perfection of men.

Tzitzit and tefillin, which are for perfecting men, should not be on women ...

לא יהיה גוליון דציצית ותפילין דהינון תקוני גבר על איתא...

This is not due simply to the sociological fact that traditionally only men have worn tefillin; there is a deeper, hidden dimension that makes tefillin specifically appropriate only for men.

8. Shomer Emunim, *Parshat Ki Tetzei* – The secret connection between tefillin and men's garments.

“Men's garments” in *at-bath* (reverse letter replacement) has the same numerical value as “This is tefillin,” because they are the secret of “the world of *duchra* (masculinity).” And do not bring a proof [against this] from Michal bat Shaul [even though] she used to put on tefillin.

כלי גבר בא"ת ב"ש גי' זו תפילין שהן סוד עלמא דדכורא ואין ראייה ממכיל בת שאול שהיתי מנחת תפילין.

9. Kaf HaChaim, Orach Chaim 38:9, in the name of Yaffe Lev – Why Michal is no proof.

When he writes: “Do not bring a proof [against this] from Michal bat Shaul,” perhaps what he means is that Michal bat Shaul was such a wise woman that she knew that her soul was from “the world of *duchra* (masculinity),” and therefore, “Michal bat Shaul had no child” (Shmuel/Samuel II 6:23).

מ"ש ואין ראיה ממיכל בת שאול וכו' אפשר, לאמר
דמיכל בת שאול היתה אשה חכמה וידעה בעצמה
שהיתה לה נשמה מעלמא דדכורא ולכך "ולמיכל בת
שאול לא היה לה ולד".

An Alternative Approach

If tefillin are designed for “the perfection of men,” how do women perfect themselves in like fashion? What is their alternative to tefillin?

10. Aryeh Kaplan, Tefillin, pp. 56-57 – Women have their own built-in tefillin.

On a most simple level, mitzvot establish a link with God. The most profound way to accomplish this is through emulating Him. Women resemble God in a way that no man could ever hope to: only a woman can create within her body, only a woman can bear a child. In this sense, a woman partakes of God's attributes more intimately than any man. The Kabbalists teach us that the hand tefillin represent the feminine element. The single hollow section in the tefillin box represents the womb, and the coils wrapped around the arm signify the umbilical cord. What a man partakes of with an object, a woman partakes of with her very body. The box of tefillin is called a *bayit* – literally a house. The woman also has her own *bayit* – the home in which she raises her family. One could say then that a woman's home is her tefillin!

KEY THEMES OF SECTION IV.

- ∞ The profound significance and great rewards of tefillin naturally play out in the mitzvah to wear them all day long. However, power requires responsibility and the standards of holiness demanded by tefillin are too much for most to bear. A compromise is struck to wear tefillin at the most pertinent and opportune time, the time of prayer. Even this, though, is not necessary on Shabbat when the holiness of the day supersedes the need to wear tefillin.
- ∞ The mitzvah of tefillin, while not mandatory for women, may still be performed by them. There is certainly precedent for this as attested to by the famous case of Michal bat Kushi. Nevertheless, such has never been the established custom of the Jewish people. Perhaps tefillin are simply too holy to be worn on an optional basis, the risk being greater than the reward. Another possible suggestion is that they were seen as male garb, made only for men by Divine design. Alternatively, women actually do wear tefillin – on the inside. The holiness and sanctity imparted by tefillin is built into their system!

PART V. CONCLUSION: PICKING UP THE SIGNALS

We have attempted to explain what tefillin are, how they work, and why they are so meaningful within the context of the Jewish tradition. Tefillin call upon us to live elevated lives, just as they seek to raise our awareness of our connection with God. “Happy is the man who wears tefillin and fathoms their mystery,” says the Zohar.

But appreciating the deep symbolism of tefillin and living up to their high ideals, while inspiring, may also seem daunting. It is important to remember, then, that the mitzvah of tefillin starts with putting them *on* the head; eventually, with practice and some help from Above, their message will also seep *into* the head as well.

1. Aryeh Kaplan, *Tefillin*, p. 45 – Receiving spiritual signals.

When a man wears tefillin, he binds himself to the very highest spiritual level. He achieves a closeness to God that even the deepest meditation could not accomplish. Of course, when a man wears tefillin and also contemplates their significance, his very thoughts are elevated close to God. But even the physical act in itself can bring a man to the loftiest heights. We can also understand this in a much simpler sense.

In order to create this bond, our tefillin must conform exactly to God’s design. The slightest deviation breaks this link. A good analogy is that of a radio. A radio is specifically designed to receive a particular type of signal. Every element in it is needed for this. Cut a single wire, remove a single capacitor, no matter how small, and you no longer receive the signal. There are precise rules by which a radio must be built. These include all the laws of electromagnetism and circuits. If these are not exactly followed, the radio will not function.

Tefillin are our receiver for a specific spiritual signal. As such, they must be designed to receive this particular kind of signal. Violate a single rule, and they become like a radio with a transistor removed. The bond just no longer exists.

We can carry the analogy still further. You would have to have an extensive scientific education to even begin to understand how a radio works. You would have to know calculus and differential equations and all the complexities of electromagnetic theory. But still, even the youngest child can turn on a radio. The same is true of the mitzvot. A lifetime of study might lead you to begin to understand their significance. But anyone can put them on and receive the signal.

KEY THEMES OF SECTION V

- ∞ You would have to have an extensive scientific education to even begin to understand how a radio works. You would have to know calculus and differential equations and all the complexities of electromagnetic theory. But still, even the youngest child can turn on a radio. The same is true of the mitzvot. A lifetime of study might lead you to begin to understand their significance. But anyone can put them on and receive the signal.