

TEFILLIN: TIED UP

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

From the age of bar mitzvah onwards, there is a daily obligation for every Jewish adult to wear the two black leather boxes of tefillin. The tefillin shel rosh, "head tefillin" is placed upon the head above the forehead starting from the hairline in a direct line between the eyes. The tefillin shel yad, "hand tefillin" are tied to the biceps of the weaker arm facing the heart.

The relationship between tefillin and Torah is very significant:

1. The very mention of tefillin is to be found in the context of Torah learning: "You shall teach them [the Torah] thoroughly to your children...Bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be totafos (tefillin) between your eyes" (Devarim 6:7-8).
2. The tefillin house four Torah passages (Shemos 13:1-10, Shemos 13:11-16, Devarim 6:4-9 & Devarim 11:13 -21) which are written on parchment like a Torah scroll.
3. One who wears tefillin is compared to one who is reading from the Torah (Pesikta Zutrasa Shemos 13).
4. Torah in its entirety is compared to tefillin (Makkos 11a, Rosh Hashanah 17a).
5. The exegesis used to derive the law that women are not instructed in wearing tefillin, is from its comparison to Torah study from which women are also exempt (Kiddushin 34a)

How Torah finds expression in the precepts performed in the world of action is revealed in the mitzvah of tefillin.

Tefillin commemorate the Exodus (Shemos 13:16) - the departure from Egypt which was the stepping-stone for the Jewish nation to accept the responsibilities of Torah at Sinai.

The tefillin tied to the "head" and "arm" symbolically convey how Torah comes to "bind" our bodies to G-d and fill them with holiness. It is how the Torah passages housed in the tefillin are wrapped and extend downwards into the realm of action.

This naturally extends to include the two primary components in our divine service: machshavah, "thoughts" of the mind correspond to the tefillin of the "head" and its expression into the maaseh, "action" executed by the hands parallels the tefillin of the "arm".

In pursuit of this serving G-d, however, it is necessary to monitor the two scouts of the body: the "eyes" and the "heart" which can so easily lead man astray. The Torah warns "You should not wander after your hearts and your eyes" (Bamidbar 15:39) to which Rashi notes "The eye sees, the heart desires and the body does the sin".

Accordingly, tefillin - the declaration of loyalty to Torah which is manifest in mitzvah performance - counters this. On a daily basis, the tefillin bound onto a Jew enjoin him to focus his eyes and heart on the holiness that mitzvah fulfillment brings. He sets his sights exclusively on the service of his Creator. And he complements his deeds with emotional fervor, knowing "The Merciful One desires the heart" (Sanhedrin 106b).

Together, tefillin attests to the subjugation of a Jew's faculties where Torah leads to mitzvos whereby he sanctifies all aspects of his body. And in the same way that the holiness of Torah housed in the tefillin demands the wearer to have a clean body (guf noki) to wear these religious artifacts (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 38:1-2), so too, should the holiness of Torah indeed filter down and spiritualize our physical bodies.

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