

This month's study with  
Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein



*Tie them as  
symbols on your  
hands and bind  
them on your  
foreheads.*

— Deuteronomy 6:8



## Tefillin: Bound to God

**W**earing *tefillin* is one of the oldest and most cherished practices of the Jewish people.

It is a biblical commandment that most likely was first implemented while the Israelites wandered the desert after their exodus from Egypt. Moreover, the directive required all men over age 13 to wear these black boxes and leather straps throughout the day, except when performing mundane activities. Therefore, if one is to picture a biblical Jew or a Jew living in the time of Jesus, perhaps Jesus himself, that Jew most likely donned these mysterious ritual objects, albeit in a much smaller form.

When originally translated, the word for *tefillin* became “phylacteries,” the Greek word for “charm” or “amulet.” However, *tefillin* are not a good luck charm; rather, they provide a bona fide spiritual connection with God. Because of their spiritual potency, today only a few select Jews wear *tefillin* all day long. Yet all observant Jews are meticulous about putting on *tefillin* every single day during prayers (the Sabbath being the only exclusion).

In Deuteronomy 6:8, we are commanded: “*Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.*” This is just one of several places in the Bible that the commandment to wear *tefillin* is mentioned, underscoring its importance and centrality in Judaism.

Yet, while the act of wearing *tefillin* remains popular among the Jewish people, most people do not grasp its deeper meaning. *Tefillin* are a symbol of love — love between God and His people. And just as love is a mystery, so are the details and depths of *tefillin*. This is one reason given

for the requirement that *tefillin* must be black, which symbolizes the obscurity of this ritual.

*Tefillin* means “that which is bound.” When a man puts on *tefillin*, he literally binds the two boxes and multiple straps to his very being. One box and straps are attached to the head, and the other box and straps are wrapped around the arm and hand. Inside the boxes are parchments with four fundamental sections from the *Torah* inscribed: the exodus from Egypt (Exodus 13:1–10); the requirement to teach our children (Exodus 13:11–16); the affirmation of the unity of God (Deuteronomy 6:4–9); and the declaration of upholding God’s Word (Deuteronomy 11:13–21). When we bind these Scriptures to our bodies, we are literally binding ourselves to God and His will.

Additionally, *tefillin* reflect the three central components of a human being: our spiritual soul, containing our thoughts and intentions; our hearts, the seat of our desires; and our physical bodies, the source of our physical strength and our ability to act. The head *tefillin* binds our soul and mind to God. The hand-and-arm *tefillin* binds our hearts and our actions. When we put on *tefillin*, we align our mind, heart, body, and soul with the will of God. In doing so, we lovingly demonstrate that “*I am my beloved’s and my beloved is mine*” (Song of Songs 6:3).

One, however, does not need to wear *tefillin* to understand the meaning. In this month’s *Limmud*, we will discover the significance of *tefillin* and how we all might integrate these principles into our own lives.

*Rabbi Eckstein*



## A Sign of God's Strength

*“And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.”*

— Exodus 13:16

The first part of wrapping *tefillin* is placing the “*tefillin* of the hand” on the arm. The box is strapped to the bicep and straps are wrapped around the arm moving down toward the hand. By beginning with the arm as opposed to the head we declare that while righteous thoughts are nice, righteous action is imperative.

The box, which is called the *bayit* — Hebrew for “house” — is constructed differently for the arm than it is for the head. The *bayit* for the head contains four compartments that house the four separate pieces of Scripture that are placed inside. The *bayit* constructed for the arm, however, contains one circular hollow space for a parchment that includes all four Scriptures.

This is hardly arbitrary. The significance between the *tefillin* of the head and the *tefillin* of the hand is that while our head may have different thoughts and ideas, they must all become unified into one cohesive and consistent action.

Another important aspect of the *tefillin* of the hand is that it is always placed on the weaker arm. So a right-handed person would place *tefillin* on his left arm and hand. One

reason we do this stems from the verse which states that the purpose of *tefillin* is so that we remember how God took Israel out of Egypt with a “*mighty hand*.” When we place *tefillin* on our weaker hand, we acknowledge that God is the source of our strength. It is God’s mighty hand, and not our own, that runs the world.

Another reason is that while the weaker hand is bound, it is the stronger hand that does the binding. This symbolizes using our strength to “tie up” our weaknesses — our tendencies toward sin. As our left arm is bound, we remember that we are bound to God, devoted to God, and restricted from doing whatever we feel like doing. In essence, we have accepted a higher standard.

Finally, it’s important to note that *tefillin* are made entirely of animal products — the leather straps, the *bayit*, even the string used for sewing. This reminds us that while we have an animal side — our physical bodies — we must use it to serve God. God is the source of our strength, and we must use our strength to serve Him.

## think about it...

1. Take an inventory of your thoughts — about what you should be doing and your desires for what you would like to be doing. Are they in sync? If not, how might you create harmony between your beliefs and your passions?
2. Based on your answer above, how do your actions match up with your thoughts and passions? How might you better align them?
3. What steps could you take every day to help you remember your life’s purpose and deepest intentions?
4. It’s easy to lose our spiritual connection during the day as we get caught up in the mundane aspects of our lives. How might we create a time and space to reconnect at different parts of the day?
5. *Tefillin* are symbolic of a loving relationship with God. In what ways can you express your love for God and remember God’s love for you on a daily basis?
6. One of the lessons we learned about putting on *tefillin* is that good thoughts must be translated into good actions. What “good intentions” or thoughts are going around your head that should be put into action? What one step can you take to put that “good intention” into action?



# A Declaration of Faith

*Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you.*

— Deuteronomy 28:10

The second part of putting on *tefillin* involves placing the second box on one's head. The *tefillin* are placed slightly above the forehead, centered between our two eyes. This place is over the part of our brain that is the seat of our most meaningful thoughts. The significance of putting on the head *tefillin* before finishing up the hand *tefillin* is that, as we will see, the hand represents the heart. By placing the *tefillin* on our heads first, we affirm that our intellect must reign over the heart. Our passions and emotions must be guided by our wisdom and knowledge.

Inside the head *tefillin* are the four sacred texts that sum up the four basic principles of Judaism: first, there is one God (Deuteronomy 6:4–9); second, He gave us the Bible, which is true and binding (Deuteronomy 11:13–21); third, just as God freed the Israelites from Egypt, so is He involved in and Master of our world today (Exodus 13:1–10); and fourth, it is our duty to keep these ideals alive by teaching them to future generations (Exodus 13:11–16).

By placing these Scriptures directly on our heads, we literally keep their messages at the forefront of our minds.

When men once wore *tefillin* all day, these tenets and values guided them throughout the day. These four ideas are the very bedrock of our faith. When we literally bind them to our bodies, they embody us as we incorporate them into our daily lives.

When a person is so consumed by his or her beliefs, it shows. When a person is full of faith, conviction, and fortitude, it can be sensed. This is why the Jewish sages attributed the following verse with the *tefillin* of the head: “*Then all the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they will fear you.*” When we instill our faith to such a great degree, nations will fear us and none will dare challenge the people of Israel who are bound to the God of Israel.

Moreover, with the *tefillin* of the head and hand, we literally wear God's name. The head *tefillin* contains the letter *shin*, the straps at the back of the head form the letter *dalet*, and the straps at the hand *tefillin* form a *yud*. Together these letters spell *Sha-dai*, a powerful name of God that we proudly display as a sign of our faith.

## God's Name *Sha-dai*

*God also said to Moses, “I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself fully known to them.”* — Exodus 6:2-3

There are many names for God in Judaism. The name *Sha-dai* is the one chosen for *tefillin* and also appears on the *mezuzah*, the box containing Scriptures that is attached to every doorframe in a Jewish home. What is the significance of the name *Sha-dai*?

Traditionally, it is a name of protection. This is why it “guards” our homes in the form of the *mezuzah* and also serves as protection for those who wear *tefillin*. In fact, there is a push in the Israeli army today by *Torah*-observant Jews to have soldiers wear *tefillin* once a day as a form of spiritual protection from physical harm.

However, another meaning can be gleaned from an exchange between Moses and God just before God redeemed Israel from Egypt. Initially, after Moses asked

Pharaoh to free the Israelites, things got worse for the enslaved people. Moses asked God why He had allowed this to happen. In Exodus 6, God replied that He had appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as “*El Sha-dai*,” but only Moses would see God as “*Hashem*.”

In essence, God was saying that the forefathers only *heard* the promise that their descendants would go to Egypt but then be redeemed, yet Moses would actually *see* it happen.

The name *Sha-dai* then represents God when we can't see the whole picture, when all we have is His promises, yet we choose faith no matter what things look like. Perhaps this is why *Sha-dai* is so protective; it represents a deep and unshakable faith in God.



## A Symbol of Love

*“I will betroth you to me forever;  
I will betroth you in righteousness and justice,  
in love and compassion.  
I will betroth you in faithfulness,  
and you will acknowledge the LORD.”*

— Hosea 2:19–20

Last, but not in the slightest bit least, we tie the *tefillin* around the hand, culminating with three rings around our middle finger. When winding the straps around the hand and finger, it is customary to recite the following verses: *“I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love and compassion. I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.”* The *tefillin* wrapped around our hand completes our service of God; it now encompasses our heart and our love.

Just as a man gives a woman a ring to wear on her finger when they become engaged, it is as if we become “betrothed” to God every day when we wrap the leather straps of the *tefillin* around our finger. Moreover, our hands represent the heart because if you stretch your arms and hands out in front of you, they are exactly in line with the heart.

Therefore, in Judaism, our hands are an extension of our hearts. Since we can’t wrap *tefillin* around our hearts, we symbolically tie it to our hands, displaying our love for God and our desire to serve Him.

Service to God only through intellect and action would be flat and half-hearted. Our love gives fire and depth to our

service. Every day, we need to reawaken our love for God. Each day, we remember that our relationship with God is a loving one.

However, along with any loving relationship comes a sense of duty and a set of obligations. Love is not only about feeling, but also about commitment. The box containing the portions of Scripture that detail our tenets of faith is placed on the bicep, facing toward the body so that it is directed at our heart. The connection between our hearts and the Scriptures makes it clear that our feelings of love must be translated into our actions.

The *Talmud* teaches that God wears *tefillin*, too. This is not meant to be taken literally, but to teach us a lesson. The Jewish sages ask, “What is in God’s *tefillin*?” They answer: *“And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth whose God went out to redeem a people for himself, and to make a name for yourself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt?”* (1 Chronicles 17:21). Just as *tefillin* express our love for God, so does God’s *tefillin* express His love for His people.

It is this mutual love that seals our eternal bond with the LORD.

## apply it...

1. Begin each day with a few moments in solitude in order to make a conscious connection with God for the day. Remind yourself that you will not go through this day alone, but with God and for God. Ask for His guidance.
2. Take a moment to check that what you do today matches up with your beliefs and passions. When making decisions, check each option for how well they fit in with your value-system and your service to God.
3. Create a physical reminder of your loving relationship with God. It can be a picture, a meaningful note, a special ring, a pin, a necklace, or anything else that you might glance at daily. This
- is most effective if the item is something that is “bound” to you and goes with you wherever you go.
4. Recommit yourself to service and worship of God every day. Our commitment to God is not a one-time occurrence, but a decision we must deliberately make every single day.
5. Remember daily the four tenets of faith inside the *tefillin*. Essentially, they are the following: there is one God whom we serve; the Bible is binding and true; God is involved in and Master over the world; and we must teach these ideals to future generations.
6. Take real, practical steps to prevent your weaknesses from taking over. Just as we bind our arms with *tefillin*, let’s take precautions and create barriers that limit our ability to engage in sinful behaviour.

# Customs and Laws Observed Today



*Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.*

— Deuteronomy 11:18



The commandment of wearing *tefillin* is incumbent upon every Jewish male from age 13, when a boy marks his *bar mitzvah* and is required to fulfill the commandments of the *Torah*. It is customary for a boy to put on *tefillin* exactly one month before his 13th Hebrew birthday so that he has a month to practice and perfect the ritual before he is fully obligated to perform it daily.

*Tefillin* are worn every day, except on the Sabbath and holidays. The purpose of *tefillin* is to enable a deeper connection with God. However, on these holy days, we already experience a closer connection and greater perspective than usual and so *tefillin* are not necessary.

Similarly, women are not obligated to put on *tefillin* (although there have been women throughout history who have done so) because the Jewish sages teach that women, with their greater intuition, are more naturally connected to God. Moreover, there is a general principle in Judaism that women are exempt from all time-bound commandments out of sensitivity to a woman's traditional and historic role as the homemaker and primary child caregiver.

While *tefillin* were originally intended to be worn all day long, today the custom is to don them only during prayer services. The rationale behind this modification is that a person is required to think only pure and clean thoughts while wearing *tefillin*. With the spiritual state of the world being what it is today, it can only be assumed that a person can keep a pure mind when in prayer. However, there are still a number of exceptionally holy men who do uphold the practice of wearing *tefillin* throughout the day.

When it comes to the laws regarding authentic *tefillin*, there is a precise tradition about exactly how they must be made. Both the boxes and the parchment must be made from the hide of a kosher animal. The boxes must be perfectly square in shape, and both the boxes and straps must be black. The parchments on which the required Scriptures are written must be tied with the hair of a kosher animal, and the boxes must be sewn closed with the sinew of a kosher animal.

In addition, the parchment must be written by an ordained, God-fearing scribe, and the verses are written with special black ink. It can take a whole year to produce bona-fide *tefillin*, and so they are quite costly. Yet, for observant Jews, it is well worth the money spent.

It is customary to kiss the *tefillin* before placing them on the arm and head and when putting them away. This affirms the loving nature of this practice and how it is an expression of our loving relationship with God.

# My Son's Tefillin Ceremony

by Yonit Rothchild

Thirty days before my oldest son's *bar mitzvah* marked the day of another celebration — the day my son put on *tefillin* for the very first time and for the rest of his life. We chose to celebrate this momentous occasion at the Western Wall, the holiest site accessible to the Jewish people today and the closest we can get to where the Holy Temple once stood.

This is the same place where King Solomon dedicated the Temple and asked that this place be consecrated for prayer for all time. As *tefillin* are traditionally worn during prayer times — and because they represent our connection with God — there could be no better place for my son to put on his newly minted *tefillin* for the first time.

As we walked down the alleyways of Jerusalem's Old City, it occurred to me how these ancient cobblestone pathways were so familiar to my children, aged 4, 8, 11, and 12. To me, seeing the Western Wall for the first time as a tourist at age 14 was both a wondrous and unfamiliar moment. For my grandparents, who were Holocaust survivors, it was a site they never dreamed they would see, but did. And for their parents, it remained a 2,000-year-old dream. But for my children, this beautiful and ancient city is home.

As we entered the area for prayer at the Western Wall, I watched as my husband taught my son a tradition that has been handed down through the centuries. I watched how my grown boy took his place in the chain of faithful Jews that spans millennia. My husband taught him the ancient practice of placing and wrapping *tefillin*. First, on the bicep of the arm, then on the head, and, finally, on the hand ending with three rings around the finger, just as the words from Hosea 2:19 are recited: "*I will betroth you to me forever . . .*" As a young man now mature enough to do so, my son was committing himself to the God of Israel forever.

Surrounding me in the women's area of the Western Wall were many Jewish women from all nationalities — Portuguese, Israeli, Ethiopian, French. Some were marking the *bar mitzvahs* of their own sons; others had simply come to pray. I felt part of a great family when these women, whom I had never met and could barely communicate with, wished me "*Mazel Tov*" and "*Congratulations.*"

Just as we Jews share in suffering together, we also share in each other's joy. Even as strangers, we are joined together by a shared history and destiny. I was overwhelmed as I recognized that as my son tied the leather straps of his *tefillin* around his hand, he was also binding himself to our past, our people, and our future.

