

Awakening in the Word

Frequently Asked Questions:

TEFILLIN

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6008

Hello-

Can you shed some light on your view and understanding of the practice of wearing Tefillin and how it relates to the Torah at Deuteronomy chapter 6? How does this relate with the physical strapping of Tefillin boxes of the arm and forehead as a daily prayer method? Is this a manner of worship only enforced by the rabbinical powers to be or is this actually what YHWH is calling us to do in Deuteronomy 6? Just curious about your thoughts.

Thank You

R.L.

The kippah (skull cap), tallit (prayer shawl), tzitzit (fringes), and tefillin are among the most notable and recognizable symbols of rabbinic Judaism. The tefillin are two black boxes that are bound to the head and arm by long leather straps. The little box worn on the head is divided into four compartments and contains four strips of parchment with verses from the Torah written on them. The box worn upon the arm contains one compartment and one parchment containing the same Torah verses. At present, the boxes contain the four proof texts from the Torah for wearing tefillin:

Exodus 13:1-10 And YHWH spake unto Moses, saying, ²Sanctify unto Me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is Mine. ³And Moses said unto the people, Remember this day, in which ye came out from Egypt, out of the house of bondage; for by strength of hand YHWH brought you out from this place: there shall no leavened bread be eaten. ⁴This day came ye out in the month of the aviv. ⁵And it shall be when YHWH shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, and the Hittites, and the Amorites, and the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which He sware unto thy fathers to give thee, a land flowing with milk and honey, that thou shalt keep this service in this month. ⁶Seven days thou shalt eat unleavened bread, and in the seventh day shall be a feast to YHWH. ⁷Unleavened bread shall be eaten seven days; and there shall no leavened bread be seen with thee, neither shall there be leaven seen with thee in all thy quarters. ⁸And thou shalt shew thy son in that day, saying, This is done because of that which YHWH did unto me when I came forth out of Egypt. ⁹And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes, that YHWH'S law may be in thy mouth: for with a strong hand hath YHWH brought thee out of Egypt. ¹⁰Thou shalt therefore keep this ordinance in his season from year to year.

Exodus 13:11-16 And it shall be when YHWH shall bring thee into the land of the Canaanites, as He sware unto thee and to thy fathers, and shall give it thee, ¹²that thou

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shalt set apart unto YHWH all that openeth the matrix, and every firstling that cometh of a beast which thou hast; the males shall be YHWH'S.¹³ And every firstling of an ass thou shalt redeem with a lamb; and if thou wilt not redeem it, then thou shalt break his neck: and all the firstborn of man among thy children shalt thou redeem.¹⁴ And it shall be when thy son asketh thee in time to come, saying, What is this? that thou shalt say unto him, By strength of hand YHWH brought us out from Egypt, from the house of bondage:¹⁵ and it came to pass, when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, that YHWH slew all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of beast: therefore I sacrifice to YHWH all that openeth the matrix, being males; but all the firstborn of my children I redeem.¹⁶ And it shall be for a token upon thine hand, and for frontlets between thine eyes: for by strength of hand YHWH brought us forth out of Egypt.

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 *Hear, O Israel: YHWH is our Elohim; YHWH is one:⁵ and thou shalt love YHWH thy Elohim with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.⁶ And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart:⁷ and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.⁸ And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine hand, and they shall be as frontlets between thine eyes.⁹ And thou shalt write them upon the posts of thy house, and on thy gates.*

Deuteronomy 11:13-21 *And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you this day, to love YHWH your Elohim, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul,¹⁴ that I will give you the rain of your land in his due season, the first rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil.¹⁵ And I will send grass in thy fields for thy cattle, that thou mayest eat and be full.¹⁶ Take heed to yourselves, that your heart be not deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other Elohims, and worship them;¹⁷ and then YHWH'S wrath be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, that there be no rain, and that the land yield not her fruit; and lest ye perish quickly from off the good land which YHWH giveth you.¹⁸ Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul, and bind them for a sign upon your hand, that they may be as frontlets between your eyes.¹⁹ And ye shall teach them your children, speaking of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.²⁰ And thou shalt write them upon the door posts of thine house, and upon thy gates:²¹ that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, in the land which YHWH swear unto your fathers to give them, as the days of heaven upon the earth.*

While these texts serve as proof texts for the practice of wearing tefillin, the origin of this practice remains somewhat hidden by time. It is generally agreed that the wearing of tefillin is an ancient practice dating back to at least the fourth century BCE (after Judah's return from the Babylonian exile).

Some of the earliest examples of Hebrew writing to survive to our times are fragments of tefillin parchments. Fragments of tefillin parchments and material for making tefillin cases were found among the first century CE artifacts excavated at Qumran, the sight of the Dead Sea Scrolls and probable center of the Essenes. Josephus and the Brit Chadasha likewise make mention of tefillin being worn among the Jews. While the Oral Torah dictates the construction and content of modern tefillin, the rabbis admit that there has been a development over time. The original tefillin may have been a simple pouch of leather worn as a headband or as part of a head covering, and as a bracelet tied to the wrist or arm. We know that some of the ancient tefillin contained the text of the Ten Commandments. There is evidence that the Ten Commandments

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along with the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9) were recited daily in the Temple prayer service. This practice changed with the development of the prayer services during the Talmudic period.

There is also evidence that the tefillin were worn for the entire day and not just for prayer. There are some who believe that it was the regular or daily wearing of tefillin that made it possible for people like Haman to identify and persecute the Jews. It may have been due to the constant wearing of tefillin that people began to understand them to be not only an encouragement for prayer and faithfulness, but also an amulet worn superstitiously for protection from the evil eye. This idea of protection is conveyed in the Greek word "phylacteries," which was chosen to translate the word tefillin.

Matthew 23:5 *But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments.*

Unfortunately, the wearing of tefillin among rabbinic Jews likewise became a means of identifying those Jews who submitted to the rabbis' authority and those, like the Karaites and Sadducees, who did not. The rabbis propagated stories that used the tefillin as a demonstration of the necessity of the Oral Torah.

Popular legend has it that the Karaites, and the Sadducees before them, interpreted the words "and they shall be for Totafoṭ¹ [see below] between your eyes" literally and as a result wore Tefillin (Phylacteries) right above their noses. One version of the story claims that the Sadducees were wiped out because of this practice. The legend goes that they kept bumping into walls and since their Tefillin were between their eyes (instead of on their foreheads) their noses were sent shattering into their brains, killing them instantly. The Karaites and other deniers of the "Oral Law" are portrayed as bumbling idiots who through their foolish practices wiped themselves out. The message of this story is that it is impossible to live (literally) as a Karaite and therefore we need the "Oral Law" to save us from this savage extinction.

The problem with this myth is that it is simply untrue. It assumes that the Karaites and Sadducees interpret the verse "and they shall be for Totafoṭ between your eyes" as referring to Rabbinic Phylacteries. However, in reality the Karaites and Sadducees never wore Tefillin at all, let alone between their eyes because this is simply not what the verse is talking about. One Rabbinite polemicist asked, "How can you Karaites know how to make Tefillin without all the specifications laid down in the "Oral Law"?. The answer is we can not because the "Oral Torah" made the whole thing up."²

While the practice of wearing tefillin, whether all day or only for prayer, may be an ancient practice, this does not mean that it is the correct understanding of the commandment of YHWH.

Despite the long tradition of donning Tefillin, it is quite likely that the four proof texts contained in them were not intended to be taken literally. Exodus 13,9 says And it shall be for you as a sign upon your hand and as a reminder between your eyes in order that the Torah shall be in your mouth. It is clear that this did not mean that the written text of the Torah was to be put in the mouth. And if this was so, then equally the written text was not required to be put on our arms and foreheads. Rabbi Simeon ben Meir (Rashbam), the grandson of Rashi and brother of Rabbenu Tam, took this view. He said that the plain meaning is that it should be as a perpetual reminder as if it were written upon your hand."³

The question we must answer is whether the statement "And it shall be for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thine eyes" is meant to be understood literally.

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Looking at the four proof texts listed above, we should note the complete lack of details concerning how to fulfill this commandment – if it was intended in a literal fashion. Nowhere do these texts specify which texts are to be between our eyes or upon our hands; nor do any of these texts tell us how we are to place these words between our eyes or upon our hands. This ambiguity of the texts would seem to indicate that these words are not to be understood literally. Let us compare these texts with the commandment to wear tzitziot upon our garments.

Numbers 15:38-40 *Speak unto the children of Israel, and bid them that they make them fringes in the borders of their garments throughout their generations, and that they put upon the fringe of the borders a ribband of blue:³⁹and it shall be unto you for a fringe, that ye may look upon it, and remember all the commandments of YHWH, and do them; and that ye seek not after your own heart and your own eyes, after which ye use to go a whoring:⁴⁰that ye may remember, and do all My commandments, and be holy unto your Elohim.*

Deuteronomy 22:12 *Thou shalt make thee fringes upon the four quarters of thy vesture, wherewith thou coverest thyself.*

In the command to wear tzitziot or “fringes” on our garments, we see several specific instructions that clearly indicate that this commandment is to be understood literally. We are told that we are to place fringes on our garments, that they are to be on the four corners, that they are to contain a cord of blue, and that they are to be visible or looked upon. While there is great freedom in the manner of making the fringes, it is nonetheless clear that we are to literally follow this teaching to put fringes on our garments. There are no such instructions given concerning the creation of tefillin.

We should also note that there are numerous texts which speak of “wearing” the Word as a wreath, a necklace, or an ornament.

Proverbs 1:9 *For they shall be an ornament of grace unto thy head, and chains about thy neck.*

Proverbs 3:3 *Let not mercy and truth forsake thee: bind them about thy neck; write them upon the table of thine heart.*

Proverbs 3:21-22 *My son, let not them depart from thine eyes: keep sound wisdom and discretion:²²so shall they be life unto thy soul, and grace to thy neck.*

Proverbs 6:21 *Bind them continually upon thine heart, and tie them about thy neck.*

Proverbs 7:2-3 *Keep My commandments, and live; and My law as the apple of thine eye.³Bind them upon thy fingers, write them upon the table of thine heart.*

Clearly the above verses are not meant to be taken literally. The intention of these verses is to encourage us to keep the Torah ever-present in our lives. We may understand the verses used as proof texts for tefillin in the same, figurative way. Figuratively, the expression “between the eyes” means that we are to have the Torah forever before us and in the forefront of our minds. The instruction to “bind them for a sign upon your hand” means that the doing of the Torah should be the work of our hands and the visible evidence of our relationship with the Creator. The teaching that commands that we write the Torah upon our hearts means that our righteous deeds are to come from the overflow of our hearts. In other words, our motivation for doing the

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Torah should be our love for the Creator. There is no need, therefore, to create or strap boxes on our arms or foreheads in order to fulfill the Torah's teaching. Instead, we are being commanded to keep the covenant in the forefront of our minds and as the primary labor of our lives.

¹ A remembrance

² www.karaite-korner.org Tefillin, Nehemia Gordon

³ <http://orthoprax.blogspot.com/2005/05/history-of-tefillin.html> The History of Tefillin