

Tefillin

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Every weekday morning after I have washed and dressed and, unless it is a fast day, drunk a glass of water, I put on my tefillin. They that, for reasons I cannot understand, are called phylacteries. The word still sounds like a form of contraception to me because when, as a fourteen year old, I saw an advert for prophylactics I was told by an almost equally ignorant teenage friend that it had something to do with birth control. Apparently it is from the Greek for “outpost” or “guard”.

Anyway, come rain or shine, hell and high water, healthy or sick, in a good mood or bad, I put on my tefillin, even if I am nowhere near a minyan or a synagogue. It is one of the most important rituals of my life. It enables me to start each day in a mood of reflection and spirituality and identification with my Jewish heritage.

As I put on, or “lay”, my tefillin (and there’s another confusing word), I look at the “houses”, the little boxes that contain little scrolls of parchment of Biblical texts that I dedicate my head and my heart to. I notice the details of the leather craftsmanship, the precise, accurate, clean lines of the squares, the relief of the letter Shin with four branches on one side but the usual three branches on the other, the complicated knots on the pristine leather straps, and the exact number of threads of sewing gut that just peep out from the recessed channels they are threaded through, and I am both amazed and perplexed.

And I ask myself, can it possibly be that Moses and his followers wore things like these thousands of years ago? Of course it is not impossible. Egyptians had been building very complex technically sophisticated structures for a long time beforehand and their jewelry and other crafts were impressive even by modern standards. But such things were luxuries confined to the minute stratum of wealthy aristocrats, not for the masses.

The Torah is vague. “And you shall bind them [these words which I command you today] as a sign on your hands and they shall be decorations between your eyes” (Deuteronomy 6), sounds to me as though it was meant symbolically, that the constitution of the Torah should be there with us all the time to guide and affect every action. In the same way “write them on your doorposts” sounds paradoxical in an era of tents. It sounds more like an injunction to dedicate a habitation to Divine values. But still, the fact is we have an Oral Law, a tradition that helps explain what was meant by the Written Law. So when the Torah says, “Take the fruit of a fine tree” on Sukkot, it is clarified by Oral Tradition as the etrog (rather than a kiwi or a kumquat), which we still use to this day. It does not strike me as necessarily unlikely at all that that was exactly what was meant by people at the time.

There is an old argument between the Medieval Scholars Rashi and Rebbeinu Tam over the actual order of the texts. Remember this some two thousand years

after every male amongst the Children of Israel had been putting them on daily so they should have known! And because of this difference of opinion a few kabbalists started wearing two pairs (some doing so consecutively, and others simultaneously) and that caught on amongst the Hassidim, who now wear two pairs of tefillin every day, one with Rashi's order and one with Rabbeinu Tam's. I do not, because my father did not and what was good enough for him is good enough for me.

It also seems likely that an ancient argument is responsible for the fact that on the head the four texts are in four separate but conjoined sections while on the arm they are all together in one. As indeed is the unique use of a letter Shin I mentioned above, with four branches instead of three. Not only, but the great archaeologist Yigael Yadin discovered ancient tefillin that were round. So, on the one hand, it is clear that tefillin of some sort have been around for thousands of years. And that's precisely why I have difficulty believing that the ones we have today have gone through absolutely no changes whatsoever since Moses's day.

But does it matter? Does it matter if the little black disks (or the multicolored knitted ones) all Orthodox and not-so-orthodox people wear might be a more recent development? The fact is that head covering of some sort for ritual occasions is an integral part of Jewish law and custom, and certainly has been documented as such for two thousand years. Indeed does it matter if head covering itself originated as desert protection or a reaction against Roman and then Christian custom? I know nowadays with the Chareidi-ization of much of Yiddishkeit that we are expected to believe that Moses wore a fur shtreimel and full Polish seventeenth century baronial gear. Indeed I have seen Charedi illustrations where Talmudic rabbis were wearing shtreimels.

I am not a slave to conformity by any means. But I do love our traditions and customs and see the value of investing most of them with authority. Tefillin mean so much to me and play such an important role in my life that frankly even if someone could prove they were invented a hundred years ago in a Romanian beer cellar I'd still put them on every morning never fail and still feel a little bit closer to Heaven.