

Dangerous Tefilin

So here is this innocent youngster on a flight in the USA trying to put on his tefilin, modestly and as inconspicuously as possible, in his seat. The air hostess has never seen these funny black boxes and straps before. They look like a device. Could be he is a suicide bomber strapping himself into a bomb. Panic. The kid is restrained. His tefilin are impounded. The plane is diverted and then isolated. Passengers are delayed and inconvenienced; appointments and celebrations are missed. It's a massive scare. The press is alerted. The FBI moves in. The young man is cooperating with the authorities. And it is not a joke. It happened here in the USA.

Is this just another example of the madness gripping us as Islamic-inspired terrorism spreads? Yes and no. We Jews are a very, very small minority and Orthodox Jews are a small minority within a minority. So in one way it is not at all surprising that most people on earth have absolutely no idea what tefilin are. Besides tefilin themselves are so difficult to explain. Aids to prayer? Surely one does not need leather straps and boxes to pray? And the very English term "phylacteries" sounds a bit like "prophylactic". Are they supposed to prevent some plague or something? Perhaps they are like the Scientologists' "magic boxes". A kind of brain monitor? And why only for men? Are they some sort of male enhancers? I recall plenty of jokes about Jews putting on tefilin in hospital and people thinking they were for taking their blood pressure. The fact is that it is very, very hard to sound logical or sane when describing tefilin to a non-Jew who has no idea and no background.

On the other hand, you see so many Orthodox Jews on flights nowadays, and they are often carrying their talis and tefilin bags or praying at airport terminals. I cannot recall a flight anywhere in the world I have taken without a black hat and beard for company. My tefilin have been checked so often at security that by now, surely, word must have got round. In the past tefilin were used so frequently to smuggle diamonds in and out of Antwerp that I'd have thought there must be diagrams posted in every customs house.

And in most schools nowadays comparative religion is taught, if only to make Westerners more sympathetic to the spread of strange Middle and Eastern religions, that the very basic features and customs of alien religions are now more widely known than ever before. Yet clearly most human beings still seem unable to tell the difference between a suicide bomber's belt and tefilin.

The security situation is getting worse and worse all the time. I have had eau de toilette, shampoo, deodorant, and even hair gel confiscated (not to mention a half a bottle of Drambuie). But it's the lunacy of political correctness and the civil liberties fanatics that are the real problem. It is utterly ridiculous that the anti-profiling lobby has been allowed to create a situation in which an eighty-year-old lady in a wheelchair is as likely to be searched as dishdash-wearing, heavily bearded, agitated twenty-year-old.

My old schoolmate, Professor Edward Luttwak, had an article in the January

18th Wall Street Journal in which he argued that ever increasing body searches and restrictions will not eradicate the problem nearly as effectively as clever profiling and personal interaction:

Given the power of widely available explosives, the amount that can be carried inside a body cavity—let alone two—is sufficient to destroy ordinary pressurized airliners at normal flight altitudes. That makes “pat downs”, or indeed any form of physical inspection that is remotely feasible in any airport ... entirely futile. That alone rules out scanners ... To screen passengers as persons would reduce costs and inconvenience ... because entire categories of passengers could be waived through with a rapid examination of travel documents ... [and history].

This is precisely the sort of checking that we have all experienced on flights to and from Israel. Certainly it is more manpower-intensive than machines, but it clearly works. It is true that the number of employees required to monitor the flights in and out of one small Middle Eastern state would be dwarfed by the needs of massive worldwide air passenger traffic. But considering the billions wasted in the US alone on totally ineffective bureaucratic security agencies, it would make more sense to have well trained, well educated men and women on duty than the poorly paid, low rung employees most of us have encountered.

We may agree that security demands we veer on the side of strictness, but sensible and careful profiling will surely eliminate any suspicion that a teenager putting on tefilin is likely to blow a plane up! On the other hand, someone ought to tell him that although there's a fixed time to say your morning prayers, you can put tefilin on at any time during the day and fulfill your duty. Or, of course, you can fly El Al.