

Morning Minyan

Lior Klirs

The trouble always starts at 8:12 a.m. when the kids are only half-alive and the girls are fresh and fragrant with their hair in curls. Mr. Thomson paces the aisle, his stout frame scraping against the desks, parting the seaweed sea of wayward tzitzit and loose tefillin straps.

“Hurry,” he says, stopping in front of tefillin-less Alex and tapping his watch. “God is waiting, but not for long.” His big hand guides Alex out the door. He looks at me out of the corner of his beady eyes, then stares at my embroidered blue velvet tefillin bag, the two cardboard protective cases strewn on top. “Thank you,” he says, gripping my right hand firmly. “Thank you, Jacob, for being a mensch.”

I nod drowsily, wrapping the black leather strap around my palm, tightening the head piece, and re-wrapping the hand strap around my fingers, once, then twice, then once again, the slack end layered onto itself like a stack of corned beef and tucked under the pile, diving down smooth and satisfying as a slide into home plate: motions I had repeated hundred of times before, done thoughtlessly. Tight enough to leave seven red welts across my forearm all morning. The problem is, no matter how tight I tie it, the tefillin will always come undone. Sometimes it takes a minute, sometimes ten, but the moment always comes, that deflated feeling when you feel your soul knocking around like a loose screw within you. It begins with the first strap which bends and sags like wrinkly flesh and passes to the second and the third, a network of nerves relaying an electric pulse, a string of dominoes, the inevitable touch and fall until it all hangs down flaccid from your middle finger like a coil of sad entrails. If I am lucky this only happens twice a minyan. Mr. Thomson watches me, his head bent curiously, nods, and walks to the next row of desks.

Mr. Thomson, history teacher, leads liberal egalitarian minyan at the Frank R. Johnson Jewish Day School. What egalitarian means I’m not

sure, except that it’s the most standard of all the choices, and by standard I mean normal. There is orthodox minyan, where you go to pray, unless you are a girl in which case you go to chat with your friends. There is alternative minyan, where you go to do alternative things like watch *The Ten Commandments* or play Torah character charades. There is Sephardic minyan, where the swarthy Torah readers with close-cropped hair chant the parsha in a nasal ululating lament. And then there is liberal egalitarian, for everyone else.

I pull the tallit around my shoulders, raise the siddur to my chest, and shiver as the coarse leather straps dig into the skin of my arm. The classroom is cold and antiseptic, walls dentist-office white. Tile floors frame horizontal rows of desks and a podium up front which is really a short table covered with a ratty tallit and a peeling wooden ark. Mr. Thomson goes down the rows, checking tefillin, sending the guys who have forgotten back to their lockers.

This rite is repeated every morning. The cool guys straggle in five minutes late, drift into the back row, shoot grins to the giggling group of ponytailed girls, and sway back and forth while giving each other back-handed high fives. After a couple of minutes Mr. Thomson shuffles up, solid and imposing under his shiny bald head, wags his rust-colored walrus mustache and says something cryptic like, “If gold rusts, what shall iron do?” And then these swaggering kids smelling of cigarette smoke apologize profusely, rolling their eyes, and drag off to their lockers only to discover that, indeed, they have no tefillin at all, although the next day Mr. Thomson sends them off to their lockers to search again.

“Wrap your tefillin with *kavod*,” Mr. Thomson always says. “And don’t throw the headstraps behind your back like you’re Tonto.” Mr. Thomson used to be Catholic, but now he is a Yiddish-spewing Ashkenazi, as he proudly tells his medieval European history class. “We can learn from all of the world’s religions,” he would say, his lips spread wide in muted glee. “I can say this because I’m a Catholic Jew.”

Mr. Thomson runs a tight ship. His minyan is a democracy—everyone has to lead at least once every semester. My time has not yet come, and I am hoping it never does. I am hoping that they will not notice me. I am sixteen but small, slight of frame. My guilty eyes hide behind heavy-rimmed glasses and shaggy hair. No one cares if I am invisible. I am content to sit in the back and watch the whole spectacle. It’s not that I don’t know how to

lead. I've heard it done so many times I could do it with my eyes closed. It's just that I don't feel it's fair—to me or to the other daveners. It would be artificial, empty, pointless. You see (and please do not tell anyone this, especially my mother)—I do not know. I do not know if. I do not know if I. Believe. I do not know if I believe. I do not know.

8:12 a.m. and tefillin are wrapping, tallitot jumping, wrinkly black kippot yanked out of denim pockets and slapped on heads. Mr. Golani paces the aisles while Mr. Thomson rolls the Torah, his muscular forearms rippling with each confident yank. The leader walks up to the podium and begins his davening, Mr. Thomson keeps rolling, and the kids are chatting in hushed tones. Alex is late and my friend Eugene has not come either—he often skips minyan for a quick fast food breakfast.

Mr. Golani walks the aisles with a bounce. His button-down gray shirt gapes at the top to reveal a manly tuft of salt-and-pepper chest hair. He exposes himself so because he is Israeli, and Israelis are showy like that. His eyes are fiery, still burning with the red flare of desert warfare, singed metal and flesh, embers from his days as a tank commander in '73, or was it '67 or '56 or even '48? We couldn't remember, not that it mattered, it was so long ago.

"Nu, ma shlomkha, Ya'akov" he says to me, "what a wonderful morning!" His Hebrew accent is thick and warm. Ehud Golani, Bible teacher, is Mr. Thomson's side-kick, the good cop to Mr. Thomson's tough guy routine. While he talks to me the kids behind him start chatting surreptitiously again, taking sanctuary from Mr. Thomson's wrath under their pious tallitot. Before I can answer him the service begins and Mr. Golani flips open his siddur and sings in a deep booming voice, pumping his fist to punctuate each sentence and pump the guys up, God's own cheerleader inspiring us to prayer.

The room becomes stifling, the noises jarring—the bass drone of the shacharit nusach, the cool guys laughing in whispers, Mr. Golani's voice so low and piercing it steamrolls over all, the girls now breaking into sudden peals of delight, Mr. Thomson pounding on the table for "respect, *kavod*, respect!" and my tefillin slithers down my arm, a coiled snake slumping around my fist. Alex rushes in, late as usual, his mushroom haircut flapping at the sides, and backs into the seat beside me as Mr. Thomson pounds harder and the leader drones on, oblivious to the chaos around him. I rewrap

my tefillin. "Hold it just right there!" Mr. Thomson booms and the service screeches to a halt, the leader in mid-*berakhah*. The cool boys whisper on for a few more seconds, Mr. Thomson's scolding spreading slowly and casually through the room like lazy rings of water.

"This is *unbelievable*," he says as the peripheral noise finally dies down until all we can hear is crackling sheepskin as the Torah is rolled up and tied. "God," Mr. Thomson says almost inaudibly, his voice reduced to a whisper for dramatic effect, or perhaps out of simple fatigue. "This isn't about me, or you. This isn't about my silly hang-ups, or your science midterm, or looking forward to hot lunch. When you kibbitz during the prayers, you are offending no one but He to whom we are praying, to whom you should be praying. Think about this—this is bad, what you are doing, this is bad, dangerous. This is about God. Up there," he points with a stubby finger, as if to remind us where God is. "Up there. This is very bad." Whenever he gets to this point, with his index finger hanging in the air, I zoom in on his left arm, the tefillin in seven pristine loops, equidistant, never saggy, never lax, always tight and firm. He ties it once in the morning and never has to look at it again.

Three years ago, before my bar mitzvah, my mother taught me the proper way to wrap my tefillin because she is a rabbi and rabbis must make sure these things are done right. But it always felt too tight, cutting off the flow of blood in my veins, so I started tweaking the process each morning—an extra loop here, a double tuck there. One day I'll achieve the perfect balance of comfort and stability.

The leader waits patiently, his finger in place where he stopped. This is a weekly occurrence, when all the table-pounding and shushing and tefillin scrambling are too much and we all need silence, and briefly, peace. Mr. Golani wears a wrenching frown. It is sad to see him so pained. He is usually in a state of youthful excitement, his Israeli verve vigorous and spicy. At pep rallies he leads our class in chanting his favorite battle cry: "Hey-O, Hey-O, Hey-O, Hey-O, Hey-O, Hey-O." The chant follows him around when he walks down the orange-painted hallways. Now he is merely old and tired. He nods sadly to Mr. Thomson who nods to the leader who continues with the word at which he stopped. The leader reads fast, racing and stumbling over the trip-words and leaving the mangled syllables behind like felled hurdles. He is making up for lost time, but through all the free-frame pauses and

manic speed-davening the words always get said in the same tune in the same order every day.

I wonder where the words go. Do they float up to Him? Do they hover in the air for a moment and drift to the floor like tissue paper? Are their wings soggy? Do they explode?

"Hey, you okay there, Jake buddy?" Alex asks, nudging my shoulder.

"Yeah," I say, "I was just wondering how he does it."

"Does what? Who does what?"

"Mr. Thomson. How does he wrap his tefillin so tight?"

8:12 a.m., my tefillin half-way on but the protective cardboard cases are missing. I look under the chair, in the folds of my tallit, in the recesses of the blue velvet tefillin bag. The bag is my mother's. It is plain, unlike most of her religious accouterments. Her tallitot are bold and garish, maroon and aquamarine, crafted in the dank recesses of old Jerusalem's Cardo in a tourist boutique. Her kippot are pillboxes, Bucharan concoctions, embroidered with crazy curlicues of raised red stitching, ridiculous affairs. Her tefillin, thankfully, are not purple. But this bag is bare and musty. It is a relic, I imagine, sewed lovingly by an old Brooklyn Hasid's trembling hand. It is safe and comforting. The gold-embossed stitching forms a six-pointed star, the velvet so lush and overgrown like wild grass that it retains the imprint of my thumbs. The zipper is always too tight—the compactly-wrapped tefillin must be crammed inside and still the stitches nearly burst.

"Sir, have you lost something?" Eugene, my clowny friend, dressed in sweatpants and an over-long T-shirt, waggles his right hand in my face. The tefillin cases, printed with pastel pastoral scenes of Jerusalem goats and crumbling walls, dance on his fingers like marionettes.

"You ever think of bringing your own set?" I ask, slightly annoyed. "That way you won't have to entertain yourself during minyan at my expense any longer."

"Whoa," he says, "take it easy, you *and* your phylacteries. And you think my parents have tefillin? My mom never goes to synagogue and my dad...I don't even know why he sends me to this school."

"So you can be a good Jewish boy who doesn't desecrate ritual object holders," I say, patting him on the back. "And probably something to do with the kids around here. They want you to have Jewish friends." Eugene

grew up in Corpus Christi, Texas where there aren't any Jews.

"Sure," he says. "And now I don't have any Christian friends. My world is all Jewish, all the time. I went to McDonald's the other day and the cashier told me 'Happy Easter! I had no idea it was Easter!'" Eugene pauses and smiles. "Oh, and I ordered a Big Mac with cheese, see, with extra bacon, just thought you'd like to know. It was so succulent and juicy." Eugene demonstrates this by drooling all over his balled-up fist and making sloppy chomping noises.

"Easter?" I ask. "What's that?" He laughs and begins to ape today's leader, an incredibly short kid with wiry blond hair and thick glasses who is really getting into the psalm. Eugene mouths the words, his face a granite mask of conviction, eyes strained in pathos, swaying back and forth in jerking spasms, his hands clutching at air, claws of longing. He winks at me and I nod, turning the page of my siddur. A minute later I get bored and look at Alex as he daydreams. Eugene now davens in a fake Israeli accent, drawing out all the "ch" sounds with extra vigor and rolling his "r's."

"You see the soccer game last night?" Alex asks me, jumping to life as the classroom stands, his eyebrows arched. "Man, that was some game." He pauses as Mr. Thomson walks by to shake our hands and commend us for being mensches and wearing our tefillin. "No," I say, bowing to complete the Barkhu, "You know, homework and stuff."

"Yeah," he says, "never do it," jerking his thumb at his chest. Mr. Thomson swivels and I see the serpentine vein on the side of his pink bald head. Alex and I bow our heads, peer deeply into our siddurs, and begin mouthing the words.

It's 8:12 a.m. and my body is heavy in the plastic orange chair. It is warm and so soft. The kids around me are in various stages of slumber, most of them dipping lightly into the subconscious like shorebirds testing the ocean's frigid waters. I've been up for two hours and sixteen minutes now. I saw the sun rise through the kitchen window while sleep-munching Cheerios. 'Only twenty-one minutes to go,' I scrawl in pencil on my desk, chancing a glance at Alex who nods solemnly. 'Check out Shira's skirt,' he scrawls back, furtively leaning over my desk as Mr. Thomson turns to the blackboard.

Mr. Thomson is busy expounding on the importance of timeliness, of being able to drop everything at the stroke of the bell at 8:12:00 a.m. and be in the mood to daven, like flipping a switch in your neshama, he

says, or something like that. Like you can just forget about calculus pop-quizzes and the girls seductive in their skimpy T-shirts, push the screeching guitars from your head, stamp the bone-deep tiredness down to black embers, and exhume the soul (so he says), icy and clean like winter air and ready to praise what exactly? "Get out your siddurs," he finishes, his nasal voice grating.

I stare blankly at the page in front of me. The tiny letters are a mishmash, the blurry translation inscrutable. The miniature-size volume feels heavy in my hand. I try to squint and make the letters swim but they won't. Mr. Thomson stands still as the singing begins, his belly slightly drooping over his pants buckle, his black tie sagging. I fumble through the pages as he approaches, trying to find the correct spot, until he is looming over my shoulder for an endless moment. He taps my shoulder. "Come and see me after minyan," he whispers over my ear.

After the mourner's kaddish ends and the kids stuff their carelessly wrapped tefillin into the tiny bags and rush off to class, I take a long time putting mine away, wrapping the straps carefully around both sides of the black boxes, weighing each side for evenness, and fastidiously zipping them into the bag. Mr. Thomson sits on his orange plastic chair, piteously small when I approach the front desk. "So," he mutters, not looking up from his siddur, his penciled notes indicating choreography and holiday idiosyncrasies dancing over the verses. "Jacob. Six weeks into the semester and you haven't led once." "I guess not," I shrug. "Why aren't you up here?" he asks pointedly, tapping the table where the yellowing, tattered tallit still lies as a mock tablecloth for the Torah. His eyes now shoot up to meet mine. His words are deeply serious, yet there is a

**Like you can just forget
about calculus pop-
quizzes and the girls
seductive in their
skimpy T-shirts,
push the screeching
guitars from your head,
stamp the bone-deep
tiredness down to
black embers, and
exhume the soul....**

softness to them, a genuine pull of mercy and understanding. I stammer for a moment.

"The Hebrew," I say. "It's too difficult for me." "You are in Hebrew honors," he counters. "That class is all in Hebrew and you have no trouble. My Hebrew is much more horrid than yours, and every day I say these prayers. Give this a try, you owe it to yourself." Now he pulls me close by the shoulder and whispers conspiratorially, "You are better than most of these students. Don't think I don't know. You don't have to be like them."

Mr. Thomson would never guess that my mind is often somewhere else when my mouth and tongue speak the prayers. I have to concentrate to keep a healthy balance. If I make a model of myself and daven with real intent, swaying assuredly and belting out the words by heart, well, that's expected—after all, they will say, he is a rabbi's son. But if I leave my tefillin in my locker, sit with my arms crossed, give Mr. Thomson dirty looks, and hide in the bathroom during the Torah service, well, that's also to be expected, you see, a rabbi's son can only rebel. Why have I not rebelled? And why have I not shut my eyes and swallowed the medicine whole without asking? Perhaps it's easier to tie my tefillin the wrong way than not to tie at all. "Thank you," I say, my throat dry and cracked. "I like davening on my own just fine."

Mr. Thomson acts as if he doesn't hear me and flips the pages in his siddur. He is waiting for me to say it. He knows. But I can't say it. Oh, he is wise, I think. Yes, he knows what he is doing and there is nothing I can do to stop him from doing it. He will give me that deep-cutting glare, that I-know-what's-going-on-inside-your-rioting-teenage-head look and don't you think you can fool me, you won't get away with it. And I will acquiesce, because that's what good boys do to remain invisible, and tomorrow I will lead prayers and read the words flawlessly, taking the hurdles rapidly and gracefully and leaving every one standing in place even if a few will wobble under my toes' glancing blows. I will act my part, a perfect fit for a perfect mold. In the fold. And he will never know what is going on inside me. And, perhaps, neither will I.

"Hey, you want to lead with me?" Alex asks at 8:12 a.m., returning from the lockers and rapidly slinging the leather strap around his bulging biceps. He shoots me a pleading look. Mr. Thomson has asked him to lead this morning knowing that Alex is too good to say no and too shy to do it alone without his best friend by his side. My head throbs warmly. I have been awake for two

hours, the early morning black, already forgotten, worlds behind.

If Mr. Thomson wants his match he will get it. I will march up there like a weary soldier and satisfy his expectations. I will knock those prayers dead. "All right," I relent. "But you don't have to catch the 6:45 bus—so you do the page numbers."

We walk together to the front table, and the kids are too busy talking and jerking around their tallitot to notice my dead-man's march. The classroom looks so much wider, deeper from up here, and the parallel rows of desks smile toward me, like I'm looking through a fish-eye lens. Mr. Thomson and Mr. Golani are making the tefillin rounds and I wonder if anyone would notice if we stood there for the next twenty-two minutes and watched the whole circus whirling around us.

Alex calls out the first page number and we begin the droning nusach of the shacharit service. That quick, monotonously looping rhythm, the sleepy morning chant that smells of musty parchment starts soft and slowly fills and widens, soon filling the room with its bass trembling. The pages march by. Barukh, my tired eyes heavy bags of sleep, Praised are you, Lord. Fatigue nearly overpowers me as I try, Barukh, to keep my legs straight and toes pointed forwards. The morning blessings, words and words again, the same and different and then the same again, Barukh, words under breath, Barukh ata, words, Barukh ata, page 20, Hashem, Barukh. Alex is still, his voice weak—he struggles to read the fat Hebrew letters. I lead, he trails a half second behind. Barukh, silence, the Shema, more words. Time for kedushah.

My mind is working, not at peace. All the times I have practiced these pages while lying in bed on a winter's evening in preparation for my bar mitzvah, all the times the words have passed through me in shul, in this classroom, in sleep—*zeh la-zeh*, they say, swivel on two, *kadosh kadosh kadosh*, they say, bounce on your toes, like Tigger! The call and response, they say, the communal prayer of holiness, we become the angels, the holy seraphim, wings spread and heavy with dew and voices ascendant in a terrible crescendo of awe awe awe. Oh Mother, I think I need help.

Alex elbows me in the ribs. He does not know the kedushah. The room is now eerily quiet. The kids have finished their talking. Those who have been sent to get their tefillin have returned empty-handed and Mr. Thomson and Mr. Golani are tired of fighting and have joined in the praying.

They are all waiting for the kedushah. And I cannot command my mouth to sing the words. I look at my arm and feel girded—the straps are tight.

Alex stares at me and pokes my ribs again, nodding encouragingly. Yes, his eyes are saying, it's all you. It's all me. Our backs are to the congregation and I can feel Mr. Thomson behind me, his mouth agape and ready to bounce on his toes. I can feel Mr. Golani's heavy breathing, his glare pinning me to the wall. This is it, I think I've really done it now. Eleven minutes of words left behind, thirty-two pages of gnarled verbs and unwieldy inflected nouns, highly wrought psalms and crude biblical syntax, dozens of blessings, all uttered perfectly, beautifully, in rhythm, in record time, eleven minutes flat until the kedushah and I can't go on because I have forgotten the words, words more familiar to me than the rhythms of my own pulse. This has gone on for too long. The entire room gasps a final breath of silence. I cross my arms and stand still, tired of waiting.

Alex is flustered and panicky. He tries to plunge through the kedushah's first stanza but instead of gracefully skating over the iced lines he blunders through, clumsily sending guttural shards: hets and chafs, cha, ech, ich. It is too late because all is lost. The kids are talking about the Redskins going for it on fourth and five and Madonna's sexy video and isn't it unfair how the public school kids get to eat hot dogs dripping with cheese on school trips to the amusement park when after all we aren't on school property and who are they to tell us what to do on our time and keep kosher and who needs that anyway? Mr. Thomson is running in frenzied circles, tugging at tzitzit, his head tefillin straps flapping behind him and I see Tonto on his horse, his long ebony Indian braids trailing in the wind. Mr. Golani yells in Hebrew and he is in his green camouflaged tank in the yellow dessert, a flak helmet and binoculars engulfing his young tight black curls, barking orders left and right as his eighteen-year-old men jump and crawl and dodge and huddle against the raining mortars. Eugene is enraptured and throws my tefillin cases to the ceiling and starts up the chant "Hey-O, Hey-O, Hey-O" and soon everyone joins in the cheer, "Hey-O, Hey-O" and Mr. Golani is screaming inscrutable Israeli slurs and Mr. Thomson just folds down, old and frail, into the tiny orange desk and nestles his shiny bald head into his hands.

Principal Zuckerman pokes his head in the room and asks Mr. Thomson what in God's name is going on and Mr. Thomson says we have

finished davening early, turns out the lights, and dismisses the kids who run off chanting Mr. Golani's hypnotic cheer into the hallways, spreading out to their lockers until the tumult dies, slow and easy like falling asleep on the living room couch on a shabbos afternoon. Alex takes one last look at me and lets out a curious little laugh, pats my shoulder and sloughs off his arm tefillin in a single yank as he walks out the door. My blue tefillin bag lies limp and empty in front of me.

And I am alone, standing there with my back to the desks and my arms firmly crossed, the tefillin straps digging red rivers into my pale flesh, firm as the moment I tied them twenty-two minutes ago, and the siddur open in front of me while God waits, arms crossed I'm sure, for His kedushah to be said. I'll wait, oh yes, I can wait all day.



Lior Klirs is a fourth-year English and Jewish Studies major at the University of Virginia. After graduation, he plans to teach high-school English at (he hopes) a Jewish day school.