
Creativity and Text: New Paths to Tzitzit and Tefillin

Judith Z. Abrams

HOW CAN WE APPROACH MITZVOT [COMMANDMENTS] CREATIVELY AND STILL MAINTAIN A SENSE OF CONTINUITY WITH JEWISH TRADITION? BY STUDYING TEXTS AND FINDING WITHIN THEM permission for renewing the creativity which once existed, we can breathe new life into our Jewish practices. Let us examine how such study might lead to creativity with regard to the prominent mitzvot of *tzitzit* [ritual fringes] and *tefillin* [phylacteries].

Tzitzit

THE REQUIREMENT TO WEAR FRINGES ON THE CORNERS OF OUR GARMENTS IN order to remind us to avoid sin is found in the Torah [NUMBERS 15:37-41] and is recited twice in the daily prayers of traditional Jews as part of the Sh'ma. In their original context, tzitzit not only kept one from sinning by reminding one to keep the commandments, but also elevated every Jew to the level of the priesthood. The four blue threads of the tzitzit (called *tekhelet*) were a symbolic way of making every Jew like the High Priest whose garments contained a good bit more of this expensive material [EXODUS 28:6, 15, 31, 33]. Jacob Milgrom, in his commentary on Numbers, notes that "The tzitzit are the epitome of the democratic thrust within Judaism, which equalizes not by leveling but by elevating. All of Israel is enjoined to become a nation of priests."¹

What were these fringes intended to look like? A surprising amount of flexibility on how the fringes were to be knotted is recorded in the Talmud:

What is the minimum length of a joint? It was taught: Rabbi says, [In a joint] the thread must be wound once, twice and a third time. It was taught: If a man wishes to make few, he should not make less than seven, and if many, he should not make more than thirteen. If few, he should not make less than seven [joints], to correspond to the seven heavens; and if many, he should not make more than thirteen, to correspond to the seven heavens plus the six intervening spaces. [B. MENACHOT 39a]²

Thus, in the days of the Talmud, people could wind the tzitzit in many different ways, as long as there was the dangling fringe of blue thread specifically required in Numbers 15. Interestingly, in the Talmudic era, it would seem that women were also required to wear tzitzit:

Rav Yehudah attached fringes to the aprons of [the women of] his household...Our Rabbis taught: All must observe the law of tzitzit: priests, Levites and Israelites, proselytes, women and slaves. Rabbi Simeon declares women exempt, since it is a positive precept dependent on a fixed time and women are exempt from all positive precepts that are dependent on a fixed time. [B. MENACHOT 43a]

Rav Yehudah was following the anonymous majority of sages (“Our Rabbis”) who ruled that women are obligated to wear tzitzit. Although Jewish practice evolved to exclude women from the commandment to wear tzitzit, in almost every other case in rabbinic literature, the anonymous majority of sages overrule a single, named source such as R. Simeon.³

With time, the way in which tzitzit are tied and wound acquired a symbolic meaning. Ba’al Haturim, a medieval biblical commentator, saw the tzitzit as symbols for various important concepts of Judaism.⁴ Each of the five knots on each tassel were to remind the wearer of the five books of the Torah. The numerological value of the word tzitzit is 600. When we add the eight threads and the five knots on each, we come up with 613, the total number of mitzvot. So when we take up the tzitzit, we are, in a sense, taking all the mitzvot in our hands. Another interpretation Ba’al Haturim gives is that each of the eight threads is meant to restrain a person from erring with one of the eight parts of the body with which a person is most likely to sin—ears, eyes, mouth, nose, hands, legs, genitals, and heart.

Having studied these and other texts, I thought I might be able to include these ideas, as well as some of the concepts of Judaism that are most important to me, in a *tallit* [prayer shawl] of my own.⁵ Using tzitzit with the thread of blue (procured in Israel) I tied the tzitzit as follows: five knots for the five books of the Written Torah, six spirals for the six orders of the Mishnah representing the entire Oral Torah (i.e., the Talmud), seven spirals for the priestly school for whom seven is the most important number (seven days of the week, seven branches on the menorah, seven years in the Sabbatical cycle, etc.), ten spirals for the Exodus narrative, including the ten plagues and the ten commandments, and thirteen spirals for the thirteen attributes of God and the thirteen-petalled rose which is the opening image of the Zohar. Thus, for me, these tzitzit symbolize the texts, narratives and institutions which form the core of my Jewish identity: the Written Torah, the Oral Torah, the Temple, the people Israel, and mystical union with God. This also adds up to 36 coils on each tzitzit, double the numerological value of the word *chai*, life. The texts mentioned above, and my Judaism, certainly represent to me life here (18) and hereafter (18).

In addition, on the four corners of the tallit I had the artists embroider the four letters of God's name. Each of these letters—*yud*, *heh*, *vav*, and *heh*—represents one of the four worlds of the kabbalah: the spiritual, the intellectual, the emotional and the physical. On the other side of each of the four corners is the name of one of the matriarchs. Sarah, who made the spiritual journey with Abraham is paired with the first *yud*, representing the spiritual world. Rivkah, who wanted to outsmart her husband and engineered Jacob's receiving of the blessing, is tied to the *heh* that symbolizes the intellectual world. Rachel, who lived a life characterized by deep emotions—her desperate desire for a child, her jealousy of Leah's fertility, and her sorrow at dying in childbirth—is linked to the *vav* that represents the emotional world. Leah, who gave birth to the majority of the twelve tribes, is the embodiment of physical fertility and thus linked with the final *heh* in God's name. When I gather the tzitzit together in reciting the last paragraph of the Sh'ma, I am both unifying God's name and bringing together the four worlds within myself to do God's will.

The theme of participation in the priesthood by every Jew has also been included in this tallit. On the *atarah*, the "crown" of the tallit

around the neck, the following verse is embroidered in gold: *You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation* [EXODUS 19:6]. This makes the priestly aspect of the tallit explicit. Not only is the tallit to keep the wearer from sin but it is to elevate one to the level of the highest-born when the wearer is serving God. The colors of the tallit also recall the priests' garb: white, gold and the blue of the tekhelet are the dominant colors, as they were in the priests' clothes.

Tefillin

WHILE CREATIVITY AND FLUIDITY ARE RELATIVELY EASY TO FIND IN OUR sources with regard to tzitzit, tefillin are quite a different matter. Today, tefillin are square, black leather boxes containing parchments inscribed with Torah passages [DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9, 11:13-21, EXODUS 13:1-10, AND 13:11-16] and are bound to the head and arm with leather straps. All manner of details regarding tefillin are designated in the Talmud as "a law given to Moses at Sinai." Thus, for example, the shape of the underside, that a letter shin must be embossed on them, that the straps must be black, and that the tefillin must be square are all considered to be "laws given to Moses at Sinai" [B. MENACHOT 35a]. According to Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, a law of Moses at Sinai is "a law that has no Scriptural basis but, according to tradition, was given by God to Moses orally at the same time as the written Torah. Such laws have the same authority as Scriptural laws."⁶ How is it that the form of the tefillin came to be so rigidly defined and enforced with such authority? This question is important because it was not always the case that tefillin only had one acceptable form.

In the biblical era, conjectures Moshe Weinfeld,⁷ tefillin used to be jewelry, essentially bracelets and frontlets that indicated the religious affiliation of their wearer. Weinfeld believes that the custom of phylacteries developed only later, toward the end of the Second Temple period.

Evidently, there was some fluidity in tefillin's development from jewelry to the black boxes we know today. Certainly, the texts tefillin were to contain varied among different groups of Jews. We know, for example, that the tefillin found in Qumran contain the Decalogue among other scriptural passages. Given this background, the Mishnah regarding the tefillin's shape makes more sense:

Mishnah: If a man makes his head-[tefillah] round, this is a dangerous practice which does not carry with it [the fulfillment of] the commandment. To put them on the palm of the hand is the manner of heresy. To overlay them with gold or put [that of the hand] on one's sleeve is the manner of outsiders. *Gemara*: The Mishnah is speaking only of those which are made as round as a nut. [B. MEGILLAH 24b/TEFILLIN 1:13]

We can suppose that if the Mishnah explicitly forbids round tefillin, gold tefillin, and tefillin worn on the palms or sleeves, it is because people were actually wearing such items in such ways. When seen in this light, we can guess that there used to be many different sorts of tefillin which may have identified Jews as members of different groups. The sages who wrote the Mishnah were likely members of the “black, leather, square tefillin” group

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and proceeded to outlaw, as it were, every other group's version of this mitzvah. This may be why they designated so many details of their version of tefillin as having come from Sinai and Moses. At its best, this could reflect Judaism's democratizing principle at work again: the plainest, and perhaps least expensive, sort of tefillin became the legislated norm. (This is somewhat ironic today, when tefillin are quite expensive.)

Even when the form of the tefillin was set, there was diversity in the way the mitzvah was performed. For example, we find that different sages had different ways of saying blessings over tefillin:

I noticed that Rav Papi recited the benediction whenever he put on his tefillin. The rabbis of the school of Rav Ashi recited the benediction whenever they touched their tefillin. [B. SUKKAH 46a]

Tefillin used to be worn all day long in the days of the sages (70-500 C.E.). Therefore, the question arose, “Should a blessing be said only when they are donned or every time they are touched and one comes into contact with their holiness?” Obviously, Rav Papi followed the former custom and the sages of Rav Ashi's school, the latter. What these divergent practices suggest is that, even once the shape of tefillin was rigidly defined, the

practices regarding them still left room for diversity and creativity. Indeed, over time, the mitzvah of tefillin ceased to be one performed all day long and instead was limited to the morning worship.

Recapturing Creativity with Tefillin

We may now ask, should our creativity regarding this mitzvah be limited by an ancient sectarian fight which no longer has any relevance? Couldn't we approach this mitzvah with the same creativity used so productively in making different, aesthetically pleasing and spiritually inspiring objects that contain words of Torah, such as mezuzot or Torah mantles?

During rabbinical school, I tried wearing tefillin for a time but was put off by their form. I wanted to bind the words contained in the tefillin to my head and hand but the square, black, leather boxes and straps repelled me. For a long time, I gave up on the idea of doing this mitzvah. Recently, however, I felt a strong desire to take on this mitzvah and decided that I would change the technology in order to make it possible. That is, I would take the parchments from my "regular" tefillin and put them into different holders. The basic mitzvah would remain—putting God's words, written as prescribed, on my head and arm—but the means of attaching those words to myself would change.

I therefore commissioned the same women who made my tallit to make soft, oval, cloth pouches to contain the parchments from my old set of tefillin. These white pouches are attached by a ribbon to the kippah and to a wrist band. On them are embroidered in gold the letters *ayin* (on the head) and *dalet* (on the wrist), recalling the two enlarged letters (the *ayin* in the word Sh'ma and the *dalet* in the word *echad*) in the Sh'ma [DEUTERONOMY 6:4] which spell the word *eid*, which means "witness."

Numerologically, the letters *ayin*=70 and *dalet*=4 equal the value of the word *v'anveihu*. This word hints at the merit of doing mitzvot beautifully:

[*This is my God*] and *I will glorify him* [*zeh eili v'anveihu*] [EXODUS 15:2].

Rabbi Yish'mael says: And is it possible for flesh and blood to add glory to his Creator? It simply means: I shall be beautiful before him in the mitzvot that I shall do [with] a beautiful lulav, a beautiful sukkah, beautiful tzitzit and a beautiful tefillah [i.e., tefillin]. [MEKHILTA DE-RABBI YISHMAEL ON EXODUS 15:2]

Doing the mitzvot beautifully, a concept called *hiddur mitzvah*, is what the word *v'anveihu* ("and I will glorify Him") is taken to mean, for how else could we beautify God but through beautiful mitzvot? The colors of white and gold are meant to harken back to the priesthood and the Temple where the priests wore white and the utensils were trimmed with gold.

Having taken on this mitzvah and used these tefillin daily for months, I am glad I took this step. When I touch my tefillin while saying the Sh'ma I can feel the texts inside in a way I was not able to with the traditional boxes. I also feel the letters *ayin* and *dalet* embroidered on the cloth as I touch the tefillin and this helps to remind me that my faith is an open door (*dalet* means "door" and is similar to the name of the letter *dalet*) to spiritual development and gives me insight (*ayin* means "eye") to help me live my life. The oval shape reminds me of my own belly when I was fully nine months pregnant: an oval with something holy and pure inside.⁸

Having changed only the technology, I embrace this mitzvah in joy and love

Nonetheless, I confess to a feeling of failure. I still wish I could perform this mitzvah in the way everyone else does it and eventually, I hope to be able to wear black, square tefillin. I did not do this as a dilettante or simply to be creative for creativity's sake but because, at this stage in my personal and spiritual development, it was the only way for me to practice this mitzvah on a regular basis. Having changed only the technology of attaching God's words to my hand and head, I embrace this mitzvah, and this way of doing it, in joy and love.

With what *kavanah*, with what intention, do I do this mitzvah? The following passage from Talmud informs my practice:

The dead whom Ezekiel [EZEKIEL 37] revived went up to the Land of Israel, married and had sons and daughters. R. Judah ben Bathyra rose and said: I am one of their descendants and these are the tefillin which my grandfather left me [as an heirloom] from them.

[C. SANHEDRIN 92b]

We never stop to ask, "What did Ezekiel's risen bones do?" The sages

asked, though, and then answered the question: Those corpses lived and did the things Jews have done in every generation, living lives of Torah, family, and good deeds which included, naturally, the mitzvah of tefillin. This image—tefillin on risen bones—symbolizes the ability of the Torah's words to bring us back from spiritual and moral death. It is a mitzvah, and a lesson, I am eager to embrace.

Tefillin on Shabbat: A Special Spiritual Opportunity?

One issue over which I have wrestled in the process of taking on this mitzvah is whether to wear tefillin on Shabbat. Normally, tefillin are not worn on Shabbat because a person (here, specifically, a man) is considered to need only two signs of the covenant with God at any given time. On weekdays, these signs are circumcision and tefillin, both of which are described in the Bible as a sign (*ot*) between God and man.⁹ However, on Shabbat and Festivals, the circumcision and the day suffice:

One might have thought that a man should put on the tefillin on Sabbaths and on Festivals. Scripture therefore says, *And it shall be for a sign upon your hand and for frontlets between your eyes.* [EXODUS 13:16]. That is, [only on those days] which stand in need of a sign [are tefillin to be worn], but Sabbaths and Festivals are excluded, since they themselves are a sign. [EXODUS 31:17] [B. MENACHOT 36B]

This is the case for men. Now what would be the case for women? By wearing tefillin on Shabbat and festivals, women could experience, at least one day out of seven or so, what men experience all the time: having two signs of our relationship with God. Perhaps women ought to consider wearing tefillin on Shabbat and festivals as special opportunities for connecting to God and to the Jewish tradition. Then women, too, might be able to derive the benefits of wearing tzitzit and tefillin outlined in the Talmud:

R. Eliezer ben Jacob said, Whosoever has the tefillin on his head, the tefillin on his arm, the tzitzit on his garment and the mezuzah on his doorpost is in absolute security against sinning, for it is written, *And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* [ECCLESIASTES 4:12] [B. MENACHOT 43b]

Clearly, the sages feel that keeping God's words *on* us may help us keep God's words *in* us. May the time come soon when we all reclaim this mitzvah in beauty, creativity and sincerity.

Notes

1. Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 414.
2. Rambam continues this tradition which is open to different ways of winding the tzitzit: "How many divisions are made in the fringes at each corner? Not less than seven and not more than thirteen. This is the choicest mode of carrying out the precept. But if one wound the threads, to form one division only, the fringe is regarded as correctly made." (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Hilkhoh Tzitzit*, 1:8)
3. Rambam endorses R. Simeon's view but in a way which certainly leaves the door open to women wearing tzitzit: "Women, bondsmen and minors are exempted by the Scriptural law from the obligation of having fringes in their garments....If women or bondsmen desire to wear garments with fringes, no objection is raised, but they do not recite the blessing. The same is the rule with respect to other affirmative precepts from the obligation of which women are exempt. If they wish to fulfill them without reciting the blessing, no objection is raised." (Rambam, *Mishneh Torah, Sefer Ahavah, Hilkhoh Tzitzit*, 3:10)
4. Commentary on Numbers 15:39.
5. The tallit was made for me by Ellyn Shain and Renee Savitz of Precious Heirlooms in Bernardsville, NJ. They were not only open to these ideas but executed them beautifully.
6. Adin Steinsaltz, *The Talmud: The Steinsaltz Edition, A Reference Guide* (New York: Random House, 1989), p. 183.
7. Moshe Weinfeld, *The Anchor Bible, Deuteronomy 1-11* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 342-343.
8. Note that Rashi, in his commentary to B. Megillah 24b, seems to admit the possibility of oval shaped tefillin.
9. Genesis 17:11 and Exodus 13:16.



Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D., has published five books on the Talmud and six prayerbooks for children. She runs a school for adult Talmud study in Houston, called Maqom, and a Talmud study group on the Internet (<http://www.compassnet.com/~maqom/>).

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