

Do Nice Girls Lay Tefillin?

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A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, THE RABBI OF A POPULAR, ORTHODOX NEW YORK SYNAGOGUE BERATED HIS SINGLE MALE CONGREGANTS FOR GOING ON “TEFILLIN DATES.” SOME JEWISHLY-OBSERVANT MEN, it seemed, had begun a practice of bringing their phylacteries with them on dates. That way, if the romantic promise of the evening were fulfilled, and a man woke up in a home not his own, he would not be prevented from fulfilling his ritual obligation to wear tefillin during morning prayer.

The image of libidinous men toting their small velvet tefillin bags on “tefillin dates” is both odd and amusing. But we were struck even more by the daily ritual intimacy of tefillin-wearing that it implied, and by the linking of male ritual objects with male sexuality.

As women involved in egalitarian *havurot* [alternative congregations], who partake in synagogue life on equal footing with men, we were drawn toward the power of the daily physicality of wearing tefillin. At the same time, the “maleness” of tefillin put us off. We spoke to women rabbis and rabbinical students who accepted all male ritual obligations, but felt uncomfortable *laying* [putting on] tefillin. Having for years seen the black boxes perched on only male foreheads, the straps wrapped around only male biceps, the objects seemed foreign and exotic, even (or especially) to those of us who had grown up seeing them in daily use. At the same time, we felt the importance of concrete and physical prayer rituals and wondered how women might go about sharing or adapting them.

Tefillin

Worn during daily morning prayers (but not on Shabbat and holidays), tefillin consist of two small black leather boxes—one worn on the forehead, the other on the left (or weaker) arm—which are held in place by black leather straps.

The boxes each contain four biblical passages, or *parshiyot*, written on separate parchments: Exodus 13:1-10; Exodus 13:11-16; Deuteronomy 6:4-9 (containing the Sh'ma); and Deuteronomy 11:13-21. Each of the biblical passages includes the instructions to *bind these words as a sign on your hand and a symbol (or reminder) on your forehead*, from which is derived the commandment to wear tefillin. The passages in the tefillin are thus self-referential. Rather literal-minded, the tradition complied with the biblical injunctions by instructing us to wear on our foreheads the words: “wear these words on your forehead.” But by so doing, the *parshiyot* make tefillin an *ot* [sign]. The head and the arm, clothed in tefillin, bear the words that confirm the instruction and signify the belief. The body clothed in tefillin displays itself as being in a condition of belief in, and acceptance of, God.

The act of *laying* tefillin is highly ritualized and is accompanied by blessings and meditations. After winding the strap of the second box around the arm seven times, the wearer wraps it around one finger like a ring of marriage or betrothal, at the same time reciting the following verses from Hosea [1:21-22]: *I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and justice, in compassion and mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness, and you shall know the Lord.*

Finally, the strap is wrapped around the hand so that it forms the letters of the word *Shaddai*, one of God's names. The interlocking motif of binding and betrothal adds another layer of meaning to the content. The *parshiyot* historically justify God's claim to our allegiance (God liberated Israel from Egypt). The binding/betrothal action mystically describes our relationship to God as an enactment of love, linked beyond history to revelation.

The Spiritual and the Physical

The tefillin box is called a *bayit*—literally, a house or dwelling. It suggests a portable representation of God's Temple, *beit ha-mikdash* [sacred house]. The Temple contains the ark with the tablets of the ten commandments, which render the entire edifice sacred, lifting it above quarried stone and precious ornament. Similarly, the *parshiyot* make tefillin into a sacred object rather than an ornamental headband.

In another sense, the tefillin box may be considered a representation of the entire self—spirit and body. Like the *beit ha-mikdash* which houses the ark and God's sacred presence, the box made of skin (leather) and the scriptural passages within mirror the body which houses the soul or spirit. As the spirit confers upon the body meaning beyond its physicality, so the sacred texts confer holiness upon the *bayit* of leather.

A number of contemporary writers have remarked on the role of the body, corporeality, and reproduction in Judaism. Elaine Scarry¹ notes that the development of a belief in God is played out physically on the bodies of the characters in Genesis (for example, the *Akedah*, or binding of Isaac, Jacob's limp inflicted by the angel, and *brit milah*, or circumcision). The Torah forms a tapestry of the progressive surrender of the human body to God, which, as Scarry points out, "does not simply accompany belief...is not simply required by belief, but ... is itself belief" [204]. The Jew willingly surrenders the interior of the body, including its reproductive capacity and issue.

It is noteworthy, then, that each of the *parshiyot* in tefillin contains a reference to offspring. The first two passages command the wearer to consecrate every first-born to God [EXODUS 13:2 AND 13:12]; each passage mandates educating children to give themselves over to God physically, emotionally and spiritually. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might* [DEUTERONOMY 6:5], *Impress these words of mine upon your very heart* [DEUTERONOMY 10:18].

Thus tefillin symbolize the transmuting of the physical into something not only physical. The binding of tefillin symbolically unbinds the body from its fleshliness, at the same time insisting that sacredness and worship always involve the body. Wearing tefillin displays a readiness to consecrate body and soul, self and offspring to the belief in God. In that sense, tefillin are a materialization of the interior of the body which is

surrendered to God, while simultaneously encapsulating the word of God bound onto the body's surface, becoming part of the body.

The Maleness of Tefillin

When a Jewish male of any place and era put on tefillin, he may well have been donning objects passed down to him from his grandfather or great-grandfather. Whether in the ninth century or today, a Jewish man prayed clothed like his ancestors through the chain of time. Are tefillin, then, the prayer garments of Jews—or only of male Jews? Are the protruding black boxes of tefillin inherently male or does their maleness derive from their use almost exclusively by men before the modern era? The questions impelled us deeper into the study of tefillin. We discovered that the link between male ritual objects and male sexuality was not the fortuitous invention of contemporary New York Jewish life, but was already deeply embedded in traditional texts about these objects.

We read in midrash that God wears tefillin.² The rabbis wonder what biblical passages God's tefillin contain. In a stunning statement of mutuality between Creator and created, the rabbis note: just as the parchments in our tefillin praise the uniqueness of God, the parchments in God's tefillin praise the uniqueness of Israel. Specifically, God's tefillin contains the line, *And who is like your people Israel, a unique nation on earth!* [I CHRONICLES 17:21]

In the visible division of the world into Jew and non-Jew, women float between categories

So both God and Jewish men wear tefillin, sharing, even if only in a mystical sense, the same sacred prayer garments. Where does that leave Jewish women? Does the female body also have an analogue in the divine? Is the relationship between women and God marked by the same reciprocity that characterizes the relationship between God and men? What does it mean that Jewish women are traditionally excluded from wearing the physical signs of identity, belief, and relationship to God that Jewish men wear?

Tefillin function to visually mark a Jew. Just as circumcision brands the naked male body as unmistakably Jewish (traditional texts refer to a non-Jew as an *arel*, an uncircumcised), so male prayer garments have traditionally and unmistakably identified a clothed Jewish man. Jewish women are not so marked. In the visible division of the world into Jew and non-Jew, women float between categories. That no specific prayer garments exist for women is not surprising; the obligation of Jewish women to pray is not universally recognized. But do Jewish women have other ritual objects or physical traditions that might serve equivalently to emulate the divine?

Although a few ritual objects and practices do exist for Jewish women, they serve the opposite function. The veil placed over a bride's face at the prenuptial ceremony and the wig or hat worn by a married woman are intended to hide a woman's face or hair, and to circumscribe her public exposure. The ring given to the bride in the wedding ceremony may symbolize love and commitment to us today, but under Jewish law it serves as a token of her acquisition in marriage. The *mikveh* [ritual bath] requires the disrobing of a woman in order to purify her from a state of bodily impurity.

The issue, of course, is not whether Jewish women have had beautiful clothes to adorn or enhance the form and beauty of their bodies. The issue is whether they have any garments or objects that connect their bodies to their spirituality in a positive way, suggesting a mutuality between Creator and created. Unfortunately, we believe, neither Jewish women nor Jewish men have traditionally seen the female body as resembling the divine.

Women and Tefillin

Contemporary women who seek to partake of rituals previously reserved for Jewish males turn to Jewish sources, seeking a textual peg on which to hang gender innovation. Women look for precedents in traditional Jewish texts for several reasons: First, we wish to see ourselves reflected in the texts, rather than absent. Second, we wish to see our actions as consonant with, rather than radically rupturing, tradition. Third, we look for validation of our own spiritual inclination, and perhaps a way of making peace with the ancient Jewish sages. Finally, we look to the exceptional woman of text and history to open up, retroactively, a space for us in the past.

But in the case of tefillin, the recovered texts have the opposite

effect. Here, the exceptional woman—the one who transcends gender limitations by wearing tefillin—reinforces rather than weakens the rule of exclusion, closing off rather than opening up possibilities. We read in the Talmudic tractate Eruvin [96a] that Michal, the daughter of King Saul and wife of King David, wore tefillin. However, Michal's example only reinforces rabbinic disapproval of the practice.

“Michal daughter of the Kushite would wear tefillin and the sages did not prevent her,” the Talmud observes. On one level, the text serves as proof that women are permitted to fulfill mitzvot from which they have been exempted. Had the wearing of tefillin been forbidden, surely the sages would not have allowed Michal's behavior to continue. However, while the sages “do not prevent her,” neither do they laud her piety in taking on this obligation. More subtly, the text implies a warning to women who want to insert themselves into male roles.

Note that the Talmud refers to Michal not as *bat Shaul*, the daughter of King Saul, as she is referred to in the Bible, but as the “daughter of the Kushite,” retroactively demoting her father and demeaning her lineage. Michal, like her brother Jonathan, was drawn ineluctably towards the charismatic David, even supporting his struggle against her own father, the king. As the Book of Samuel makes clear [I SAMUEL 18], the marriage of Michal and David was a love match for Michal, but a marriage of expedience for David, connecting him to the royal house and legitimating his crown.

When David returns with the sacred ark, triumphant from battle, Michal observes him from the window, an indication of distance between them. Seeing him dancing ecstatically, scantily clad, exposed, she is embarrassed and contemptuous. Why? Her criticism of David—that his dancing lacks dignity—is a veiled expression of marital discontent. In the biblical account, Michal picks a fight with David, asserting her majesty and royal credentials—David's initial reasons for marrying her. Does she mean to awaken his passion, assert her position, or scold him into more seemly behavior? Whatever her intentions, David responds harshly. And so, we are told by the narrator [II SAMUEL 6:23], “to her dying day Michal daughter of Saul had no children”—a delicate way to indicate the severing of intimate bonds.

Thus, in the rabbis' reading of the biblical text, Michal who wears tefillin is a pathetic figure—devoid of woman's role and woman's pleasure. Because the wives of kings may not marry again, she is fated to live out her

life without an intimate and loving companion and without children.

Rabbinic law exempts women from fulfilling most time-bound precepts such as tefillin because the obligations of motherhood hold a prior claim on their time. So it is not so much the sages but Michal's childlessness that "did not prevent" her from wearing tefillin.

As we read it, the rabbinic citation of Michal's example contains a warning. Wear tefillin, usurp male ritual, and you will become like Michal—a "manly" woman, cut off from the possibility of intimate connections with spouse and offspring. An unnatural act begets an unnatural life.

Designing Tefillin

What does it mean for a woman to wear tefillin? The first time we talked about women and tefillin, one of us had never touched a pair. Frankly, we thought of them as something like a sacred jock strap, intimately connected to maleness, taboo. Can you talk to a man who is wearing tefillin? we wondered. What does wearing tefillin do to him? In contrast to Jewish men, the image of a woman wearing tefillin carries little resonance in Jewish texts and history. Garbed in prayer garments traditionally worn by Jewish men, she resembles neither her father nor her mother. Perhaps this explains why many women who would like to lay tefillin find it difficult to participate in this practice. But perhaps this also offers women freedom from the obligation to follow precedent.

If the male associations with tefillin stand between a woman and this important ritual, would specifically-designed women's tefillin enable her to wear them? In considering the possibility of reinventing tefillin for women, we found it instructive to return to the Talmud's discussions on the design and wearing of tefillin.³ The rabbis debate whether tefillin straps can be green or white or only black; whether tefillin may be worn on the Sabbath; whether tefillin must be square or can instead be round in shape; and more generally, to what extent tefillin can diverge from the norm before becoming invalid. Much of the rabbinic debate is recorded in the following form:

Rabbi X said: This aspect of tefillin is a law given to Moses at Sinai. But

Rabbi Y said: This is not so, etc.

The former statement asserts the inviolability of a particular aspect of tefillin,

while the latter opens up possibilities. Some rabbis supplement or forego the legal discussion by offering stories about the magical, life-extending properties of tefillin or their fantasies about God's tefillin.

We retrieve from the Talmud's discussion the sense of a time when the community standard for a ritual practice was still in the process of development. A traditional practice existed. Some rabbis held firmly to that standard, linking it with the inviolable ("a law given to Moses at Sinai"). Others held a more liberal view, allowing a wider variation in practice and form. Some issues were simply so well accepted that no discussion is recorded. Thus, for example, there is no debate in the Talmud over which biblical passages should be included in tefillin or about whether the passages in the Bible actually meant wearing the verses in boxes on one's body. These issues were presumably resolved by the time of the Talmud.

Still, the diversity of approaches that the Talmud does record helped us in considering how to broaden the ritual to include women. As we studied texts, we worked on designing "women's tefillin." Questions abounded. How closely should women follow the tradition? To what degree may individual variations be expressed? What aspects of tefillin (if any) should remain unchanged? Should women find a different set of verses to insert into the tefillin boxes? Is there value to everyone wearing the same verses?

Initially we wanted to create "vegetarian" tefillin—non-leather objects that would not necessitate the killing of animals. We experimented with a variety of materials to form the straps. To our surprise, only leather felt right. Not only do leather straps provide support for the boxes and the appropriate amount of resistance and strength when wrapping, but the experience of leather on skin was viscerally powerful.

Eventually, we came up with two prototypes. The first was the traditional box-like tefillin, but painted white rather than black. The second, more innovative design drew on two sources: the *tefillin shel rosh* [head tefillin] found at Qumran that resembled a leather headband with four embossed capsules in a row, and the silver ornaments that Middle Eastern women wear across their foreheads. Following the Jewish tradition of *hiddur mitzvah* [beautifying a commandment], we envisioned the head tefillin with four compartments made of silver filigree, worn like a headband across the forehead. For our purposes, we felt that retaining the traditional scriptural passages inside the tefillin was a good thing.

Renewing the Ritual

Today, tefillin seems esoteric, alien and alienating even to many Jewish men. Some of our male contemporaries have never seen tefillin, others own a pair barely broken in, worn at a bar mitzvah and perhaps to recite the Mourner's Kaddish. Witness Philip Roth's description, in *Patrimony*, of his father's tefillin, a symbol of his maleness and his Jewishness, abandoned in a gym locker. Why would women be at all interested in tefillin, either traditional or innovative?

As they say in the Talmud, *tzei u-l'mad*, go forth and learn. At a National Havurah Committee retreat we offered a workshop on women and tefillin that was strangely and unexpectedly moving, and—well—binding. Our class began by sharing personal associations with tefillin: heavy black straps cutting into flesh, arms marked by welt-like ridges, being bound, bondage. We looked at a set of intact tefillin, and another “deconstructed” set whose innards we could examine. The next day we all put on tefillin that had been loaned to us. Each person said the prayer, and learned the traditional procedure for wrapping the straps. Then, something astonishing happened. No one wanted to remove the tefillin! Instead, we chose to wear them as we studied texts for the remainder of the workshop. Even the participants who never lost their sense of discomfort (“a mild affliction of the flesh,” one called it) felt the power of wearing tefillin.

We emerged from the workshop with a range of possibilities for viewing women and tefillin. For some women, the very desire to wear tefillin presupposes a commitment to halakhah that would dictate more traditional choices. Women students at the Conservative movement's Jewish Theological Seminary, for example, must accept male ritual obligations, including tefillin, to be counted in the *minyan* [prayer quorum]. Some are comfortable with this requirement, others are not. Some women look to expand halakhah through innovations that reflect the tradition but mold it in new and meaningful ways.

The process of coming to terms with the ritual can also shape one's choices. Our workshop participants at first expressed enthusiasm for our innovative designs. However, after we had studied tefillin and worn them together, most of the participants declared themselves comfortable for the first time in their lives with the traditional objects.

The complicated physical/spiritual experience of tefillin convinces us that ritual prayer garments can function powerfully in the lives of Jewish

women. As women experiment, recovering traditionally male objects and practices and inventing specifically female ones, we believe new traditions will take shape and become integrated into Jewish practice.

One promising avenue is to seize upon the unravelling of gender roles inherent in the verses from Hosea that are recited when putting on tefillin. Hosea sets up an analogy between a man betrothing a woman and God betrothing the people of Israel. When a Jewish man wraps himself in the straps of tefillin and recites the betrothal words from Hosea, he imagines himself momentarily as God's beloved, as God's bride. For an instant, he sees himself as both man (his real situation in the physical universe) and woman (his position in Hosea's metaphor).

When a *woman* lays tefillin, she too recites the verses from Hosea and sees herself as God's beloved. As she utters God's promise of betrothal and addresses the female “you” of the Hebrew *v'eirastikh* (“and I betroth you”), she too can imagine herself momentarily as both male and female. Seen in this light, the binding of tefillin unbinds both men and women from the limitations of gender. The androgyny enacted in the ritual suggests that all human beings have both male and female attributes, and that both women and men can spiritually aspire to resemble the Divine, in whose likeness both were created.

Notes

1. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).
2. B. Brakhot 6a.
3. See B. Menachot 35a et seq.



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