

**PARASHAT BO  
TEFILLIN  
JANUARY 27, 2007  
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Shabbat Shalom.

While I love our Shabbat community here at Temple Emunah - last Shabbat, hundreds came to enjoy our full-day Synaplex Shabbat - I also have to admit that I love our Sundays. Last Sunday was great. OK, let me pause right here: Sunday evening was hard for many of us Patriot fans. While I normally root for the Jets, when the Pats beat them, I did not hold a grudge, but cheered them on to victory in San Diego and almost to victory last week when they lost to Indianapolis.

So except for that, Sunday was great. Our shul was filled with students learning and with numerous opportunities for adult learning led by Hal Miller-Jacobs, Mark Weiner, Rabbi Jacobs and myself. And, I spent some of the morning in the library reading stories about Israel and the upcoming *Tu B'Shvat* holiday to the youngest in our community.

My favorite moment, however, may have been our *tefillin* class. On many Sunday mornings, Rabbi Jacobs and I show up early to teach our bat and bar-mitzvah students and their parents how to put on *tallit* and *tefillin*. There's a sacred intimacy to these *mitzvot*: the cloth over our head and shoulders and the leather straps and boxes of the *tefillin* with sections of the Torah in them. They are both wondrous and unusual. When I teach *tefillin*, a *mitzvah* that brings us closer to God, we are continuing a tradition that has been passed down for thousands of years. I find great power to that.

But, what do *tefillin* have to do with this morning's Torah reading, *Parashat Bo*? Our reading seems to discuss Pesah<sub>h</sub> more than *tefillin*.

We find in this week's *parashah* the last three plagues, eating matzah because we had no time to let the dough rise, and Pharaoh finally letting us go – these vignettes that make up the story of our becoming a people.

This process then continued over at least 40 years, and each of our three pilgrimage festivals remembers a different piece of it. Pesah<sub>h</sub> or Passover commemorates the beginning – that God loves us so much that we were redeemed from slavery in Egypt. Shavuot recalls the Revelation at Sinai, where God's command unified us with the ethical and spiritual laws of our Torah. Sukkot relates the journey in the desert, the process of those 40 years and beyond.

While all three of these festivals and the events they celebrate are critical, Pesah's theme, our redemption from Egypt, is paramount. For without that, none of the others would have been possible. Because it is the most central event in Jewish history, it is mentioned most frequently. Each and every day we recite the *Sh'ma* and its blessings, recalling the Exodus. Every week, on Shabbat, we sanctify the day over a glass of wine and recall that it is a reminder not only of creation, but also of *yitziat mitzrayim* - coming out of the "*meitzar*" - the narrow place, or, as it more commonly known, the Exodus from Egypt. The entire holiday of Pesah is replete with numerous rituals that keep this event alive in our memories.

This entire idea of remembering the Exodus through ritual is born in this week's *parashah*. The most obvious rites include the Pesah, the Paschal sacrifice and the eating of *matzah* – both are mentioned in this *parashah*. These are critical, but are better left for a sermon closer to Pesah time. I do not want to inspire fear that it's already time to clear out our cupboards!

Instead, I hope to focus on a different commemoration. After God commands us to eat *matzah* on a special festival and teach our children about this miraculous event, the text reads: "*V'hayah lekhhah l'ot al yadekhhah ulzikaron bein einekhah lema'an teheiyeh torat adonai b'fikhah ki b'yad hazakah hotziakhah mimitzrayim*. And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead – in order that the Teaching of Adonai may be in your mouth – that with a mighty hand Adonai freed you from Egypt." (Exodus 13:9) The context of this verse is not 100 percent clear. What is the "this" to which God is referring? Is it what came immediately before? That is the *matzah* – does God want us to take some *matzah* and wear it on our hands and head? Probably not. So what is it?

The next verse sheds some light on this question. "*V'shamarta et ha hukah hatzot l'moadah miyamim yemimah* – You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year." So, this practice is a holiday that we will keep each year at a certain time: Pesah will serve as a reminder to you - it will be "*L'ot*" - LIKE a sign upon your head and hand. From the context here, we see that God commands us to observe Pesah so meaningfully that it will resemble an object of jewelry worn on your hand and head. It will be so powerful that it will feel as if it is an actual object.

Now, the mystery of this "*ot al yadekhhah*" - the sign upon your arm - has not been totally clarified yet. In the last book of the Torah, in *sefer Devarim*, Deuteronomy, there is a similar passage. This passage has become immortalized in our *Sh'ma* prayer that we recite twice every day. "*V'hayu hadevarim haelah asher anokhi metzvkhah hayom al levavekaha* ... And these words I command you this day you shall take to heart. You shall diligently teach them to your children. You shall recite them at home and away, morning and night. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, they shall be a reminder

above your eyes, and you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your homes and upon your gates.” (Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 9)

In this passage, it is clear that we should take the aforementioned words - the actual line - “*Shma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Ehad* – Hear O Israel Adonai is our God, Adonai is One” - and bind them to our hearts and above our eyes. We should affix them to our doors and gates. As the passage in Exodus relates to us, we should teach these words to our children. Teaching is something very important in Judaism. But here, we are actually taking words and tying them onto our bodies as signs themselves. In *Shmot*, in Exodus, we were commanded to remember the Exodus every year so forcefully that it will be LIKE a sign upon our heads; here, in *Devarim*, we will ACTUALLY bind words to our heads!

This is the origin of the mitzvah of *tefillin* - small black boxes that have even smaller pieces of parchment with the *Sh'ma* and other passages from the Torah inscribed upon them. Each and every day (except Shabbat and holidays when we have other symbols), we tie these boxes filled with WORDS onto our bodies so that we can remember how much God loves us. This is done in an intimate and powerful way, by physically tying these words onto our bodies each and every morning. As we put on the *tefillin*, we symbolically marry God. We reaffirm our direct and intimate connection to the Holy One. As we wrap the *tefillin straps* around our fingers, we reenact a wedding ceremony. The straps around our fingers are like a wedding band, and we recite the words, “*Vaerastikh l'olam* – and I betroth you to me forever.”

Now, how can we explain these two passages that deal with signs upon our bodies? While the rabbis understood both of them as referring to the *mitzvah* of *tefillin*, to the commandment to put on *tefillin* every weekday, it is clear that they are different. Why are they different?

Professor Jeffrey Tigay of the University of Pennsylvania, an outstanding Bible scholar and Conservative rabbi, seeks to explain the difference between *Shmot/Exodus* and *Devarim/Deuteronomy*. He writes: “What began as a metaphor in Exodus 13 was interpreted or recast literally (by the book of Deuteronomy). At first glance it might seem surprising for Deuteronomy to give a ceremonial interpretation to something that Exodus meant metaphorically. Deuteronomy normally presents a more abstract approach to religion than do the other books of the Torah. However, the nature of Deuteronomy’s ‘abstractness’ may help to explain why it might have been the book to ordain the practice of wearing *tefillin*.” (Jeff Tigay, JPS Commentary, p. 443.)

Tigay explains this – “Deuteronomy’s abstractness is aimed primarily at combating an overly anthropomorphic conception of God and sacrificial worship, and it must have had the effect of reducing the role of sacrifice in daily life, especially in the provinces. In its struggle against idolatry, it even outlaws

religious artifacts that had once been considered unobjectionable, such as sacred pillars and trees. But Deuteronomy does not indiscriminately oppose religious symbols per se. It ordains the precept of *mezuzah* and it preserves the injunction to wear fringes on one's garments – (*tzitzit*).

Because the book of *Devarim* is uncomfortable with symbols of God, it depletes “an already small stock of religious symbols in Israelite religion. Concrete, visible symbols are important.” Being physical beings ourselves, we need objects to focus our hearts, minds and souls. Thus, we are given *tzitzit* and, here, words to bind onto our bodies. The book of Deuteronomy was aware that while some symbols are problematic - especially those which suggest idolatry - others are needed.

*Devarim* makes a dramatic shift here. *Pesah*, one holiday, does not suffice to remember our redemption from Egypt. To remember God's redemption of the Jewish people, the metaphorical sign upon our heads has become a tangible object, fixing Divine words to our bodies. *Tefillin* is a critical mitzvah - now we can physically attach ourselves to God and literally feel on our hands, arms and heads God's Presence in our lives.

The rabbis took the fact that these words should be recited each day and applied it to the *tefillin*. *Tefillin* is not a once-a-year event, but a daily rite observed by Jews every morning.

The images of my *Saba* - my Grandfather, my *Abba* - my father, and my *Emma* - my mother – rising each morning and immediately putting on their tefillin are powerful pictures that I will take with me forever, and now, when I daven at home, my children see me put on my *tefillin* and appreciate its great power.

*Tefillin* have made a comeback in recent years, as more and more Jews have learned how to don them and have bought their own pairs. In a week from Sunday, our Brotherhood will sponsor the World Wide Wrap, an opportunity for men and women, boys and girls to learn about and put on *tefillin*. I hope many of you will join us!

We need concrete, daily mitzvot if we are to fill our lives with *kedushah*, with sanctity, with a sense of awe. *Tefillin* do just that.

By tying words of Torah to our hearts and minds and reciting them and teaching every day, we can feel God's presence.

Shabbat Shalom.