

Parasha Va'etchanan
To Masada and Back; a Tefillin Story

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Shabbat Shalom! Barbara, thank you for that very nice and short introduction. I am just glad that I did not have to introduce myself. Dick once again thank you for giving me the opportunity to share some words of Torah. I am both humbled and grateful for the opportunity to speak to you all today. Because of the time, place and space in this week's D'Var, I would like to dedicate this to my friend and "Jewish Father" the late Herb Weinstock z"l.

It was an extraordinary morning, the sun was shining and the sky was a brilliant shade of blue. I was in Israel, with Temple Emunah's 2009 trip. We were on top of Masada – which in and of itself was wicked cool!

I took the cable car up – so I wasn't exhausted or shvitzing. The best part was that we were about to daven Schacharit. Rabbi Lerner was, in his usual fashion, running around making sure that the service was all set up and ready to go. He was also pushing tefillin on any willing taker. Or at least that was my impression at the time. Eventually he got to me and asked if I

wanted to put on tefillin. In that moment, in the five seconds it took for me to consider it, a million things raced through my mind; including do I really want to do this, and now? At that moment, I made a life altering decision -one that has become incredibly meaningful to me.

To give you some perspective, I have been wearing a tallit for a very long time, twenty-five years to be exact. It made the most perfect sense to me from the moment I contemplated wrapping myself in one in fulfilling the mitzvah of tzitzit. Granted, twenty-five years ago, many women, including almost all of the women of this congregation were not there yet, – but I did not see it as a blazing egalitarian statement. However, women laying tefillin – THAT was a statement.

The first time I ever contemplated wearing tefillin was during Rabbi Marci Jacobs' tenure here at Temple Emunah, about 6 years ago. At first and in some secret way I admired that she did so – but I had a hard time seeing myself wearing tefillin for a few reasons. The most obvious, and most embarrassing to admit today, is that it looked really silly. To someone outside of our tradition or even not familiar with the mitzvah, wearing leather boxes and straps on your arm and head does not exactly inspire a call to holiness or spirituality. The second reason was that I was not required to do so – it is a time bound mitzvah, for which I and all women are exempt, and the

contradiction of some of my other time bound practices was lost on me. And lastly, what if I didn't work for me? If you take on a mitzvah, can you stop? I spent some time really giving it some thought and became intrigued by the possibility of imagining myself doing the mitzvah

I approached Rabbi Jacobs to talk about it, and while she strongly encouraged me to take on the mitzvah, she also strongly encouraged me to give it even more serious thought before doing so. She suggested that the World Wide Wrap might be the right introduction time, as it was more of a try-out rather than a commitment, and if I wasn't comfortable it would be not obvious at all if I did not continue. It sounded like a good idea and I was certainly considering it. As it turns out, we were in Israel before the Wrap took place –so I wasn't quite certain but the timing was close and worth giving it a try.

So let me bring us all back to Masada – I take the tefillin and have absolutely no idea what to do with them. Thankfully, Rabbi Lerner asked Stuart Lerman if he would help me out. Stuart so very patiently assisted me in both the wrapping and the Barachot – which he needed to repeat more times than I can count. I still need a cheat sheet. I want to take this opportunity to publically thank Stuart for his instruction, patience, and mentorship– each and every time I wrap tefillin I think of you.

As we began the Schacharit service, I was self-conscious, a bit out of sorts, and not really able to concentrate on the davening. I had trouble turning the pages, and was watching the straps fall down my arm. Yet, I was amazed that I had done it, and was equally amazed I had done it on Masada – the symbol of Jewish resistance and non-conformity. It was certainly out of the “norm” but wasn’t sure if the physical and spiritual discomfort was worth doing it again.

Before our trip was over, there was another Schacharit opportunity at the Kotel -although at the Robinson Arch rather than out in the open on the Plaza – but that is a D’Var for another day. This time when Rabbi Lerner came by with the tefillin I surprised myself and said yes without hesitation. Davening at the Kotel is always very special - wearing tefillin just added another dimension. Again, Stuart patiently walked me through. This time it was just as physically awkward, but not so much spiritually. I started to get it. While I was still not ready to make a life-long commitment – it was an amazing opportunity and I was happy to have done it – twice in Israel.

When we returned to the States, and I did not have tefillin on the first weekday morning service I attended, I missed them – I missed the ritual. I missed the discomfort. I missed being part of the group of tefillin wearers. I was quite surprised at the feeling. When services were over, I immediately drove myself

over to the Israel Bookshop and purchased a set – although with great trepidation at possibly being publically humiliated and chastised for suggesting that the set was for me. I needn't have worried – I was served with the greatest dignity and respect, and believe it or not, encouragement.

The following Sunday morning I showed up with my very own tefillin and joined the ranks of tefillin wearers everywhere.

In the five years that I have fulfilled this mitzvah it has become incredibly meaningful to me. I love the ritual of the order of it – first putting on a tallit, then wrapping the Shel Yad (or Arm tefillin) around my upper arm, tightly enough that it stays up – but doesn't cut off circulation. I love counting to seven and trying to get the spacing even as I wrap the straps around my forearm. I love that my hair is always a mess 3 seconds after putting on the Shel Rosh (head tefillin). I love the art of getting the Shin just right on my hand and tucking the strap in. I then play with that all during the service as a way of reminding myself of the mitzvah. I love that during the Shema itself, I touch the tefillin with tzitzit at the moment we chant the mitzvah. While I have gotten good at turning pages I like that it isn't easy. We all know that there are days when our prayer is more of a “go through the motions” experience rather than attaining a sense of kavanah. However, when I am wearing tefillin, I seem to always have a higher level of concentration

and focus and feel the Divine presence in the prayer. I also love that at the end of the service I have the tefillin marks on my arm that last for an hour or so. While I always enjoyed attending morning minyan, wearing tefillin has me eagerly anticipating the opportunity to come whenever possible so that I can put on tefillin publically. I especially enjoy Sunday morning, when I know that there will be other women wearing tefillin there as well. Yes Kathy, I will adapt this into a Minyan story. So, am I making a blazing egalitarian statement – well yes and no? Which brings us to today’s Torah portion.

Parasha Va’etchanan contains among other things the Shema and in it the commandment for the laying of tefillin which is repeated multiple times. “And you shall bind it as a sign upon your arm and they shall be reminder above your eyes.” (Deut 6:8) In the Torah it appears to be a very physical and mental reminder to remember and act on the mitzvot. Since it is repeated multiple times it seems to signify a seriousness in which we should pay attention to fulfill it. While the Torah itself gives no directions, no instructions for how exactly to do that, our beloved sages found a way, and an interesting one at that.

In researching the concept, and history of women and tefillin, there was not as you might expect a rich body of texts. I did however; find no absolute prohibition per se, but the

understood implication that women are exempt. The Mishnah states “Women, slaves and minors are exempt from the recitation of the Shema and tefillin, but are obligated for the Amidah Prayer, mezuzah, and grace after meals.” (Berakhot 3:3) The Talmud states “Michal daughter of King Saul used to wear tefillin and the sages did not protest.” (Eruvin 96a) However, over the centuries, other Rabbis did very much protest. In the Aruch HaShalchan, I paraphrase that while Michal was a pious woman and knew that she should be scrupulous and careful about the cleanliness of her body (a major criteria for the wearing of tefillin), it does not give permission for other women to perform the mitzvah as they may not know about the exceptional care concerning a clean body. There are other examples, although few of women wearing tefillin, but they include Rashi’s daughters, which has not been definitively proven, but used by just about everyone, and Fazonia, the first wife of Rabbi Haim ben Attar. Evidently, his unnamed second wife wore tefillin too.

Present day Rabbis as a whole have some very interesting and differing opinions on the subject. The topic seems to be all the rage these days. I found several worthy of note. As you may have heard the Orthodox High School SAR, has allowed two girls, who are conservative Jews, to wear tefillin during morning minyan. Rabbi Haskel Lookstein, Principal at Ramaz, another Orthodox High School, proactively relayed that while not going

so far as to recommend the practice, he and the school would allow girls to wear tefillin using the argument that men are not scrupulous in the care of their bodies either these days and are equally distracted, so therefore why are women different?

While not a ringing endorsement, it certainly is a fairly liberated view for an Orthodox Rabbi. While neither are wholesale allowances, I see some hope that at least on an individual basis the practice may gain some ground in the Orthodox world.

However, to the contrary, I also found the words of one extremist, whom I will not mention by name, that equate women and tefillin with the followers of Korach and declared that Conservative Judaism is an abomination. There are others as well who are as vociferous in their objections and are downright misogynistic in their attitude, but in the interest of keeping this a positive D'Var, I will refrain from further comment.

I speak to you today with a sense of gratitude that Temple Emunah takes such a great lead on egalitarian worship in the Conservative Movement. Less than ten years ago, there were no women laying tefillin here, and it is due to Rabbi Jacob's influence and her role as a Rabbi and dugmah that this has changed.

While our number is small, six or seven at last count, it is growing. I am especially heartened that some of the post bat

mitzvah young women have taken it on past the requirement for the 7th Grade Class. I am also heartened that the Brotherhood encourages all to participate in the World Wide Wrap. I know that I have very much enjoyed the honor of mentoring others; men and women, boys and girls in laying tefillin for the first time. It is really a great honor to do so. This is the part where I put in a plug for both the World Wide Wrap – a terrific opportunity to try out the mitzvah with no pressure to continue should you not feel it.

So does it feel like a blazing egalitarian statement for me now? The answer is the same yes, and no. Yes, because there are still so few women laying tefillin – and no, because at this point I consider that I am commanded to do so and it is therefore natural that I should.

I have been back to Masada twice since 2009 and both times was able to daven the Schacharit service with our community wearing tefillin. On both occasions I wanted to pinch myself to make sure it was truly real – that I was indeed back in Israel, back on Masada, and able to return to the first place I wore tefillin. Each time the joy was better than the last.

Shabbat Shalom.