

Notes on Tefillin

By David Rozenson

David Rozenson has been a member of Temple Emanuel since 1999. He was born in Tel Aviv and grew up in Ramat Gan and Queens, NY. He is a lawyer and compliance consultant to investment management firms. He enjoys the many opportunities to learn together with other Temple members. According to his family, David's biggest claims to fame are winning Jeopardy! three times and selling jokes to Conan O'Brien. He is a nerd.



I recall a news story a few years back about a young man who was briefly detained by airport security because of a suspicious object in his carry-on bag. The object in question was a little cloth bag containing tefillin.

I can forgive the security personnel for their concern, since it is easy to imagine that they had never seen tefillin before. To the unacquainted, tefillin must look . . . pretty weird: two small black leather cubes attached to flanges that connect them to long leather straps dyed black on one side.

They have been familiar objects all of my life, and they still look weird to me! In this way, they differ from most other Jewish religious objects. Usually, their use (in not their full ritual significance) can be surmised by their appearance: tallis, candle sticks, spice box, kiddush cup, menorah, pointer. The same is largely true of ritual objects of other religions that are used by lay persons – bells, incense burners, drums, beads, icons. (The specialized equipment used by gentile clergy is another matter.) We do have other religious objects that could cause gentile head-scratching, such as the Arba Minim on Sukkot. But those are not intended for use on a year-round daily basis.

Frequently, I have heard an inquiry about tefillin answered with; “Oh, they’re phylacteries!” This is not helpful. This is like explaining the laws of kashrut by saying, “It’s quite simple. We don’t eat treif.” I don’t know anyone who routinely refers to tefillin as phylacteries, not even at a phylactery factory. In fact, the word is used more often among Dungeons and Dragons players, where it is defined as “the name given to the repository used to store the life force of a lich.” (Don’t ask.)

Speaking of phylactery manufacturing, my recent on-line foray into the world of tefillin taught me that I know only a fraction of the body of knowledge associated with their specifications, beyond their basic structure (wooden cubes containing parchment with scriptural passages, attached to straps) as described by Rambam in the Mishnah Torah. (Check it out at sefaria.org.)

If you shop for a pair you will learn that there are different types and sizes, depending on which tradition you follow, and that they vary in the quality of materials and workmanship. Your choice will also depend on how much you can spend. We are taught that using any basic halachically acceptable gear will fulfill the mitzvah, but you honor Hashem if you get something that is better quality. And besides, it’ll last longer so it’s a better value for the money!

My on-line sources also tell me that one’s tefillin should be examined by an expert about every six months or so, depending on frequency of usage, atmospheric conditions, local custom, etc. I confess that I have never had mine inspected and I don’t know when I will get around to it. Like just about every other aspect of Jewish religious practice, I am only going to devote as much attention to the care and maintenance of my tefillin as I think is reasonable, a judgment based on no one’s authority but my own proclivities.

My personal experience with tefillin is limited but personally meaningful. It began with the purchase of my own set before my bar mitzvah, and my father Arye’s instructions on how to put them on, take them off and store them. He taught me the “Chabad” way of tying the strap around my hand, which I rarely see others use. (My father studied at Chabad in Warsaw when he was an adolescent.) After my bar mitzvah, I faithfully put them on every morning — for about five days. There then followed a long stretch where I only put them on when, about twice a

year, I was approached by nice young Chabadniks on the street— on Allenby Road or Dizengoff Street in Tel-Aviv, or 47th Street in Manhattan (where my father had an office). I think the Chabadniks identified me as an easy mark, with my hereditary guilt feelings affecting my demeanor and posture. However, I did enjoy confounding their expectations by showing them that I knew what to do and say.

Since those distant days, my parents have passed on, and I now associate tefillin with saying Kaddish for them on their Yahrzeit. I now use my father's set, and gave my own tefillin set to my son Dan, who likely hasn't worn them since graduating from Schechter.

When I do put on tefillin, it becomes a way of reconnecting with my father and the world he knew in Poland. By the time he was twenty he had left the Cheder far behind, joining Betar and later Lehi, illegally entering Eretz Yisrael, trying to make a living and support a family and eventually, living a modern middle-class life in New York and Ramat Gan. When I put on his tefillin, I remember what his origins were, the family he lost in the Shoah, and how difficult the decision must have been to devote himself to political struggle and to leave for Israel on his own. There are times, of course, when I think about my mother's life journey, but those thoughts tend to be inspired by food.

Though my feelings about tefillin are largely bound up in family nostalgia, that is not all. There is also something uniquely and esoterically Jewish about putting on tefillin— its very weirdness is part of the experience. Putting on tefillin in a minyan feels like the sharing of a singular rarefied bit of wisdom with other Jews in a way that is not comparable to any other practice or activity. Maybe I should do it more often . . .