

The Survivors' Tefillin

Parashat Eikev, Deuteronomy, Chapters 7-11 | August 18, 2022

When America entered World War II, a young Orthodox Jew from New York by the name of Meyer Birnbaum was drafted, served in Patton's army, and was part of the original force that entered and liberated Ohrdruf, which was an extension of the concentration camp Buchenwald. Birnbaum ended up staying for six months in Germany in order to help address the needs, lives, and futures of the Jewish survivors. His memories were recounted to the writer Jonathan Rosenblum and published as a book, titled *Lieutenant Birnbaum*. At the heart of his tale is a Jewish ritual that is quite famous, but it is Birnbaum's experience with Jews who had been through hell that will allow us to see this biblical rite with renewed and profound appreciation.

The passages we study this week reiterate the commandment known as *tefillin*, or phylacteries. And while *tefillin* is the standard term in traditional Jewish parlance, it is not a term mentioned explicitly by the Bible. *Tefillin* are twice discussed in Deuteronomy. The first is in the passage known as the *Shema*:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.

And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be a upon thy heart:

And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and risest up.

And thou shalt bind them for a sign upon thine arm, and they shall be a symbol between thine eyes.

And thou shalt write them upon the doorpost of thy house, and upon thy gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9)

The final verse refers to the obligation known today as *mezuzah*, which is the placing of a parchment containing certain passages from Scripture on the entrances of our homes. But the penultimate verse describes the obligation to bind biblical words to our arms and to place them atop our heads, above our eyes. These are the *tefillin*. A similar passage appears several chapters later, which in the traditional liturgy is recited daily along with the first passage of the *Shema* and has become associated with it. In Deuteronomy 11:13 we are informed that:

It shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul... (Deuteronomy 11:13)

Moses then outlines in this passage the rewards that will result from love and obedience and the punishments that will occur in the case of sin. Then he exhorts Israel in verse 18:

Therefore shall ye place these my words on your hearts and on your soul, and you shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be a symbol between your eyes.

And ye shall teach your children, to speak of them when thou sittest in thine house, and walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and risest up. (Deuteronomy 11:18-19)

As interpreted by rabbinic tradition, we place biblical passages inside two leather boxes, tie one on our arms, known in Hebrew as the "*shel yad*," and place one on our heads, the "*shel rosh*." While the *shel rosh* and the

shel yad are constructed differently and contain different numbers of pieces of parchment, both contain within them four passages from the Torah: the two that we have discussed from Deuteronomy, and two earlier ones from Exodus, which also reference the *tefillin*.

The words introducing the commandment are essential: “*you shall bind them.*” In putting on *tefillin*, Jews express that they are “bound.” But bound to whom? Bound, of course, first and foremost, to God. To wear *tefillin* is a sign of faith and love.

That is why one of the experiences that so impacted Birnbaum in his interaction with survivors was their desire to reflect this faith and this love in their own lives. Birnbaum describes how American GIs discovered two teenage Jewish boys in the nearby woods and brought them to the young lieutenant. Birnbaum recollected that, “When the two boys were brought in, their first request was to borrow a pair of *tefillin*.”

“How do you know I have a pair of *tefillin*?” Birnbaum asked them.

“All Jews have *tefillin*,” they answered him.

“Their naïveté,” Birnbaum reflected, “was touching. Even after all they had seen, they still could not imagine a Jew anywhere in the world without *tefillin*.”

This is striking, because as the rabbis have understood it, *tefillin* are more than mere reminders of our Judaic obligations; they are a symbol of the reciprocal relationship of marital love between God and Israel. Many Jews recite a verse from the prophets as they wind the straps: “*v’eirastich li le’olam*,” “and I will betroth you to me forever.” The Almighty, the Talmud enigmatically remarks, also wears *tefillin*, but his parchments contain not praises of God, but praises of Israel. This is meant as a metaphor to describe the bond of love between us.

In Birnbaum’s case, the young men he had met had experienced such horror that one might have expected them to lose their faith, to cease to believe in a betrothal between Israel and the Almighty, but the opposite was the case. All they wanted upon being freed was to place *tefillin* on their heads and their arms, to bind themselves to God. Birnbaum readily gave his

tefillin to them, but what happened next teaches us something new.

Tefillin have come to be associated with the bar mitzvah. It is a ritual begun a month or two before a boy comes of age. And of course, many of these survivors would not have had regular bar mitzvahs. Birnbaum, therefore, tells us what occurred:

I gave them my *tefillin* and went back to my reports. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed that they were passing the *tefillin* back and forth without putting them on. I went over to them and warned them, “Listen, this is not a game. *Tefillin* are not a toy to be passed back and forth. They looked at me, with sadness in their eyes. “But we don’t know the laws of *tefillin*. We were in the camps long before our bar mitzvahs, and we don’t even know how to put them on or what blessing to recite.”

Birnbaum proceeded to provide them with a makeshift bar mitzvah:

I helped each one wrap the *tefillin* and say the *berachah* [blessing] and gave them my little *siddur* [prayer book] to daven [pray] from. When they had finished, I gave them some dried kichel that my mother had sent me and sardines I had requisitioned from the house of a nearby German.

As I once argued in *Commentary*, we learn from this story something else about the *tefillin*: To put them on, you need someone to teach you; you need, ideally, a father who has previously put them on himself for many years. You need parents to mark a bar mitzvah. The obligation of *tefillin* in Deuteronomy is joined with the obligation of teaching our children. This in turn allows us to understand that *tefillin* embody an obligation to bind ourselves to our ancestors. The ritual, which is so seemingly mysterious to those who have never seen it before, is actually an embodiment of Judaism. The commandments are declared by God, but they are taught to us by those who came before. We are therefore obligated not only to connect our-

selves to God, but also to our past. These boys in Ohrdruf needed someone to show them how to perform what was both literally and symbolically a tie that binds, not only to God, but to our forebears. *Tefillin* are a literal and a symbolic connection tying together past, present, and posterity.

But we are still only scratching the surface of this complex commandment. My grandfather, Rabbi Ahron Soloveichik, noted that of the two *tefillin*, one is placed on the head and the other near the heart, and suggested that they reflect two different modes of thinking and feeling. One which he called the “logic of the mind,” and the other which he referred to as the “logic of the heart.” The former reflects knowledge of God and his laws through reason, for there are forms of knowledge of the Divine and of morality that are accessible to the human mind. But the *tefillin* of the heart reflects the Jewish love for God and for one’s people that has the power to astonish and to defy expectations.

This, in the end, is also what we find in Birnbaum’s experiences. These young boys who Birnbaum met were not the only ones to request *tefillin*, for soon after his arrival at Ohrdruf, Birnbaum came to a place called Feldafing, which had originally been a German base and was converted into a DP camp by the Allies. There Birnbaum remained, spending time with the survivors from many camps who had been brought there, and marking Yom Kippur there. The spiritual leader of many of the DPs was Rabbi Yekusiel Yehudah Halberstam, known as the Klausenberger Rebbe. While he had survived, his wife and children had been murdered in the Holocaust.

Birnbaum reports that:

As soon as word got out that I had kosher *tefillin*, the whole block wanted to put them on. Every morning, they would line up under the watchful gaze of the Klausenberger Rebbe, who would make sure that no one tarried. He used to stand there saying, “All right, put on the *tefillin*. Faster, faster, make your *bracha* [blessing]. Finish putting on the *shel rosh*. Say *Shema*...Take off the *tefillin*. Next.”

This line formed every day. Day by day, those who

used to line up to stand before the Nazis now lined up to bind themselves to their God and to their past: hundreds of Jews standing in line to don *tefillin*. Birnbaum writes that decades later, after moving to Israel, he had thought of giving these *tefillin* away and had sent them to a *sofer*, a scribe, to be examined. And the scribe, hearing about the *tefillin*’s history, reacted with reverence, saying,

You mean the owner of these *tefillin* was in Feldafing? Are these the *tefillin* that we used to put on in a minute and a half?

In the end, Birnbaum realized the treasure he had, and he left to his own sons the *tefillin* that the skeletal DPs he encountered used to put on every day.

Based on pure reason, from the perspective of the logic of the mind, these *tefillin* were like any other. If properly written and constructed, then they would allow the wearer of them to fulfill an obligation. From that perspective, we can understand why Birnbaum initially thought to give them away. But how precious these *tefillin* truly were when considered by the logic of the heart! The *tefillin* contained within them the spirit of so many survivors, their devotion, their loyalty—a logic of the heart that continued to believe, at a time when many might have expected them not to, that the God of Israel would still make Himself manifest in miracles for his people.

Meyer Birnbaum passed away at the age of 95. The funeral was attended by Jonathan Rosenblum, who had written up Birnbaum’s story and who thought that he knew everything about the man. Suddenly, in the midst of the eulogies, something happened. Rosenblum himself describes how,

...a very old man entered the hall sobbing. He kissed the deceased’s feet and then cried out, “These are the same *tefillin*.”

One may well assume that this mysterious man referred here to the *tefillin* worn in Feldafing, but Rosenblum, as he writes, learned that this was not the case; and we can learn more about this individual from an article by Debbie Shapiro. The man’s name was Eliya-

hu Herman, and he had been deported from Hungary to Mauthausen. He took his bar mitzvah *tefillin* with him, hiding them in his leg, keeping them with him at all times. At the end of the war, he was taken on a death march to another location, Gunskirchen. He and several others escaped and disguised themselves by taking SS uniforms from dead Nazis. They suddenly came upon an American Jeep, and the GIs, thinking that they had encountered the enemy, were prepared to fire. These survivors had no IDs, no way of proving who they were. So Herman pulled out his *tefillin*, which could have killed him if the GIs thought first that it was a grenade, but then one of the Americans looked at them, recognized what they were, and said in Yiddish, “*Du bist a Yid?*” “Are you a Jew?”

Shapiro, citing Herman, writes that Eliyahu,

...started crying, and said, “You are the *Moshiach* [Messiah]!” The soldier ordered me to recite a Jewish prayer. I said *Shema*. He immediately embraced me and started kissing me.

Herman, Shapiro writes, told the GIs about the Jews in Gunskirchen who needed help and then passed out. When he came to in a hospital, he did not know who the Jewish GI was who had saved him. Many decades later, his story was told in the Israeli media. I conclude the tale of Eliyahu Herman by quoting Debbie Shapiro’s article again:

Saturday night, the phone rang in the Herman household, and when Eliyahu answered the phone, a stranger asked, “Are you the man who was in Gunskirchen 65 years ago?”

Eliyahu replied in the affirmative.

“Do you remember what you said to that Jewish soldier?” the stranger asked.

“I told him, ‘You’re the *Moshiach*.’”

A few days later, Eliyahu and Rabbi Meyer Birnbaum, a well-known scholar in Jerusalem and author of *Lieutenant Birnbaum*, met at Rabbi Birnbaum’s

home in Jerusalem. Of course Eliyahu brought his *tefillin*. They are always with him.

It was Birnbaum, in other words, who had found Herman, and Herman was the man who had come to pay his last respects to the deliverer he had met, and to inform the Jewish GI who had given his *tefillin* to so many that he too was holding onto his own *tefillin* that his own father had given him. Herman, in other words, was a man who believed his *tefillin* had saved his life; a man whose *tefillin* brought redemption to his fellow Jews; a man of whom we may never have heard, but whose *tefillin* bound him to all members of his people and who inspires us to make the logic of his heart our own.

Discussion Questions:

1. What similarities and differences are there between the commandment of *tefillin* and the other ritual garment discussed in the *Shema* liturgy, the *tzitzit* (ritual fringes)? What might we learn from comparing these two commandments?
2. How do the “logic of the heart” and the “logic of the mind” work together in other areas of Jewish religious life?

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