

## What Does Tefillin *Do*?

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Every Monday morning at Robbins Hebrew Academy in Toronto, where I serve as a Resnick Intern, my second-grade students enter the chapel just as I am wrapping up the Torah service with my middle school students. And every Monday morning, without fail, these seven-year-olds gather around me, reach out to touch my arm, and ask about the funny-looking box on my forehead. They wonder: “Do the straps on your arm hurt from being too tight? What’s inside of those boxes? What do those straps and boxes *do*?”

My answer to the first question is always: no, they are not meant to be so tight that they hurt you!

My answer to the second question usually goes something like this: tefillin are comprised of four essential sections from the Torah taken from the books of Shemot (our parashah, in particular!) and Devarim. Housed inside little boxes that are bound above the forehead and on the bicep, these verses are declarations of faith and peoplehood.

My answer to the third question is a little more complicated.

Twice in our parashah, we are introduced to what we now know as tefillin:

וְהָיָה לָךְ לְאֹת עַל־יָדְךָ וּלְזִכָּרוֹן בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ לְמַעַן תִּהְיֶה  
תּוֹרַת יְהוָה בְּפִיךָ כִּי בְיַד חֻזְקָה הוֹצֵאתָ יְהוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם:

“And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead—in order that the Teaching of יהוה may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand יהוה freed you from Egypt. (Exod. 13:9)

וְהָיָה לְאֹת עַל־יָדְכֶם וּלְטוֹטָפֶת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם כִּי בְחֻזֶק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יְהוָה  
מִמִּצְרַיִם:

“And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand יהוה freed us from Egypt.” (Exod. 13:16)

Our sages explained that the placement of our tefillin as a “sign upon our hands” and a “reminder on our foreheads” is meant to represent the intellect (*tefillin shel rosh*) and the physicality (*tefillin shel yad*) of a person. For Keli Yakar, Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, both the tefillin that sits on our arm and the tefillin that sits above our eyes are meant to represent the dichotomy that is at play between thought and action.

Since October 7, many of our reactions have oscillated between thought and action. Like so many of us, I have been checking in with family and friends in Israel daily. I feel helpless, the most I can offer being an “I’m thinking of you” or “I love you.” And yet, my simple “thoughts and prayers” have been most welcome and appreciated.

My cousin who lives in Jerusalem has spent many days in the home of Jonathan and Rachel Goldberg-Polin, whose son Hersh remains in captivity by Hamas in Gaza. Sometimes, my cousin can help the Goldberg-Polin family by running their social media channels and organizing interviews for them to share their story. I know he feels helpless. He wishes there was more that he could do for this family. We all do. But his small actions have made a huge difference. Not only has he offered comfort and presence to Hersh’s family, but he has taught those around him (including me!) what it means to physically show up for others in a moment of immense pain and vulnerability.

Recently, I caught up with an old friend whom I haven’t seen in over six years. He asked what I’ve been up to since we last saw each other. I told him about the past three out of six years that I’ve spent living in Israel, studying first toward a master’s in education at Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies, and then as part of my rabbinical training at JTS. He blushed, and shyly admitted that he wanted to ask how I was

doing since the events of October 7, but that he didn't know how to bring it up. "I didn't want to say the wrong thing, but my thoughts are with you and the Jewish community," he told me. His thoughts, though a seemingly small gesture, meant the world to me in a moment of rising antisemitism and divisive narratives.

Then there are stories like that of Vivian Silver's funeral. Silver, a Canadian-Israeli peace activist, was murdered in the October 7 Hamas attack on Israel. At her funeral in Kibbutz Gezer, Silver's sons honored her memory by recalling her peace activism, including stories about how she helped transport Gazan children to Israeli hospitals. Palestinian and Israeli women alike, and many members of Women Wage Peace—a women's grassroots peace movement in Israel founded by Silver—showed up to Silver's funeral. Kafaia Massarwy, one such member of Women Wage Peace, stated, "We are all *here* together with love, with all the pain—Arab, Jewish, Christian—it does not matter who we are. We are all human."

Our thoughts and our actions have the power to create change, to offer love, and to be a force and source of positivity and goodness. Our tefillin, and these stories, teach us that our thoughts *and* actions are both important, and can exist in balance. We don't have to allow our thoughts to excuse us from action, and we don't have to allow our action to be guided without our thoughts.

Keli Yakar explains that the *tefillin shel yad* should be placed on the weaker hand to illustrate that a human's hand—the power of a human's action—is weak compared to God. Human beings need God to help strengthen their hands.

On this point I disagree with Keli Yakar. As humans made *betzelem elohim*, in the image of God, we are partners in creation. We are powerful agents of *helping* God make this world a just and kind one. Our thoughts, and our actions, matter. And our tefillin remind us that we are partners with God in creating a healed world through our thoughts and our actions.

So, what do the straps and boxes that we bind to our bodies every day *do*? Tefillin are an *ot*, or sign, to remind ourselves

to remain closely bound to our deepest values, and to allow those values to guide our cognition and our behavior. Our tefillin remind us to think, with our hearts and with our minds, and respond through our actions with generosity, love, and compassion—for ourselves, and for the world.